Scattering Stars Like Dust

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Scattering Stars Like Dust

by Dovesummer

Summary

It was the excuse he would give Jack later: he hadn't been prepared for the lure of the mirror. Its magic was nothing like the magic used to commit the crime. It was alluring. Intoxicating. It was entirely organic to the owner, the draw of the mirror created with an enviable ease. Will felt a heat flood through him. He realized with no small amount of surprise that he was aroused, experiencing his own body as though he were a distant observer of its reactions.

He wasn't consciously aware of moving but he *was* aware of stopping. He stood in front of the mirror - a mirror that had no right to be in this room - and considered the dark version of himself reflected back. Its lips curled into a cruel grin and Will inhaled sharply. He removed his glove, unable to keep himself from reaching out. He wanted - no *needed* - to touch that smooth, dark plane of glass.

As soon as his fingertips hit the mirror the room was plunged into darkness. His vision narrowed to a single point of light, a shiver running through him as he realized it was only growing larger because he was falling toward it, powerless to stop the inexorable draw of something he couldn't yet identify.

Notes

Title is part of a quote attributed to Rumi:
We come spinning out of nothingness, scattering stars like dust.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Will woke to the buzzing of his phone. He'd set it to vibrate in the hope that it wouldn't wake him, but unfortunately for Will he was a fitful sleeper.

It was his own fault really. He should have turned it off.

He sighed. He didn't need to look at the screen to know who was calling. He kept his eyes closed in the vain hope that it was a dream and Jack wasn't calling him back into the field a scant four hours after he'd finally fallen asleep.

Fortune brings in some boats that are not steered, Will thought as his phone buzzed again. He sighed. He'd never been partial to *Cymbeline* anyway. In his experience suffering did not lead to pleasant outcomes. Plus, three quarters of a play's worth of literary build-up had been rendered obsolete in the face of Shakespeare's desire for a happy ending, resulting in some wildly unbelievable machinations. Or perhaps it had been a patron's desire.

"We are all beholden to someone," Will said softly as his phone buzzed once more. If he concentrated he would know why Jack was calling, but he was tired and he would need his strength for whatever crime scene he was about to see.

Besides, there was only one person who called him at three in the morning. And only one reason for the call. Reluctantly, he reached out to pick up the phone. "What now, Jack?"

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Cradling his thermos of coffee, Will approached the home. It was the standard Colonial style home so common throughout Virginia. Built to be symmetrical, it had four rectangular windows across the first floor and four across the second. It was white and likely recently painted. The door held a splash of color, the vibrant red standing out against the white pillars of the veranda. It was remarkable only in how unremarkable it was - except perhaps for that bright red door.

Will sipped from his thermos as he took in the scene. He'd had two quick cups before leaving his house, burning his tongue in the process, and the thermos was already mostly empty. But he knew he was going to need the rest of it. It was a pity magical ability didn't render one immune to human frailties like exhaustion (or burnt tongues, for that matter). He still had to rely on caffeine.

The porch was already cordoned off by green tape: SUPERNATURAL CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS! A handful of people from a variety of agencies were milling about, some clearly done with their duties but not ready to leave, others still checking for evidence around the property. Most of them kept well back from the crime scene tape.

He spotted Beverly standing at the foot of the steps. "Jack inside?" he asked, his voice rough with lack of sleep.

Beverly's nod was surprisingly subdued and Will paused to look at her.

"I thought I had the monopoly looking that tired," he said, the joke falling flat. She gave him a wan smile, such a far cry from her normal grin that Will felt a stab of real concern. Beverly had an unflagging optimism, her dark eyes always sparkling with barely contained laughter. Will had often thought of her as 'chipper'. When they initially met her bright personality and glib way of speaking had annoyed him, but he'd quickly grown to like her.

It probably didn't hurt that she'd been once of the few people who were kind to him when he was first brought on. At eighteen he was the youngest Mage ever to join the FBI's Occult Investigative Unit - abbreviated as OIU or sometimes just OI (which led to all number of jokes within the FBI). In fact, he was the youngest person ever to join the FBI. A number of exceptions had been made due to his abilities to allow him to join so young. As a result he was a relative celebrity at Quantico; frequently treated with awe and occasionally disdain. Rarely spoken to like a normal human being.

Beverly, on the other hand, made small talk with him about the cases or told him about her weekend. She suggested restaurants in the DC area or sites to visit in his virtually non-existent downtime. She made him feel almost *normal*.

She asked him to go to lunch after a few weeks. He'd been on edge the entire meal, assuming this was when she would try to pick his brain and find out what made him tick - plenty of others had asked him pointed questions to determine just what made him so powerful. But she never once asked him about his magic. She insulted his food choice, which had Will hiding a smile. Apparently Beverly was not a fan of fried eggs on burgers. He left the lunch feeling surprisingly happy and they'd made a habit of going once a week since then. It was by far the most social Will had ever been with anyone.

More than a decade later, it was still the most social he was with anyone.

He searched her face, and the more he looked at her the more concerned he became. She was paler than normal, the dark circles under her eyes practically bruises. Even her hair seemed dull.

"You ok?" he asked quietly.

"Crossed the perimeter by mistake," she said dully. "I'll be fine in a day or two."

Will narrowed his eyes at her. They both knew she was lying. Her voice was a quiet monotone: she'd been drained more than she was admitting. It would be more than a day or two before she recovered.

Will reached out to place his thumb on the dark skin under her right eye. She flinched. The touch hurt due to the enchantment embedded in her skin, but Will knew she was also shocked by the touch itself. He didn't think it was the first time he'd touched her, though when he chased his memories he had to admit he couldn't find one where he had. Not even a handshake. He mentally shook his head at himself as he ran his thumb gently across the dark skin. She sighed, some of the color coming back to her cheeks.

“You shouldn’t have, Will,” she said. “I would have been fine in a couple days.”

“We both know you wouldn’t have,” Will said. “But now you will. All you need is a good night’s sleep.”

She snorted and Will smiled in response. A ‘good night’s sleep’ probably wouldn’t be happening for either of them any time soon.

“Jack’ll be pissed you used any of your energy to help me. He wants everything directed at the scene in there.”

Will shrugged. “You might be my only friend, Beverly. I don’t care what Jack thinks.”

“That’s depressing, Graham,” she said, a teasing lilt returning to her voice.

“Besides. What Jack doesn’t know won’t hurt him.” He winked and she grinned as he ducked under the tape. He probably shouldn’t have done it. The energy expended to neutralize an enchantment that had taken hold on someone was not insubstantial, although it was energy Will could normally afford to give away. But Jack had been running him ragged lately, and he’d been tired - physically and psychically - before he’d helped Beverly.

Still, he couldn’t let her go through the next week as a zombie.

“Why such a strong enchantment this time, Jack?” Will asked as the man approached him.

“You’ll understand when you see the scene,” Jack said gruffly, giving Will a sympathetic once over. “You up for this, Will?”

“Are *you*?” Even Jack looked haggard and tired. Jack shrugged, his large body sagging lower as he did. If Will squinted he could see the pressure the man was under as a physical thing; brick and mortar weighing him down. The enchantment was starting to work on him, too.

“Stop.” Will felt a tingling down his spine at the Command, but no compulsion to obey. He was more powerful on his worst day than Jack was on his best. Will quirked an eyebrow, the unspoken question of why Jack had bothered with magic lingering between them. Jack appeared annoyed. He was obviously tired; he’d probably done it without thinking.

They stood face to face, though they did not meet each other’s eyes. Jack had long since stopped trying for any type of eye contact, resigned to the fact that Will would focus on his ear or forehead, but never look him in the eyes.

“You need to go, Jack,” Will said, voice soft. “The enchantment is already starting to wear you down. Stay too much longer and it’ll start draining your energy.”

Jack gave him a frustrated look. Will shrugged. “Your men did it, Jack. A lighter enchantment and it wouldn’t be impacting you.”

He was probably still fighting the enchantment out of sheer stubbornness, Will thought, suppressing a smile. Jack didn’t have much magic, but he had a Voice and Will had to begrudgingly admit the Voice had served him well. Combined with his naturally authoritative

demeanor and imposing presence, the extra push a Voice gave had afforded him an impressive close rate and allowed him to climb through the ranks and eventually head the OIU.

It wasn't enough magic to withstand the heavy-duty enchantment his men had placed on the line for this scene, though. In fact, considering the Mages on the scene they'd probably set up a line that even *they* couldn't cross. Will frowned at that thought, running a hand through his hair and wondering off-hand if he'd brushed it before leaving his house.

His fingers hit a tangle. Probably not.

"Through there," Jack said, gesturing to a door. Then, turning to the few magically inclined techs still in the home, he boomed "Clear the scene."

Will watched in amusement as techs exited the scene with speed that suggested they been on their toes, waiting for permission. Jack was looking more and more haggard by the moment, the pale beneath his dark complexion readily apparent. He gave Will a brief nod and Will inclined his head curtly in response, handing Jack his coffee thermos and watching until the other man was gone. Once he was completely alone, he opened the door Jack had indicated and moved into the heart of the crime scene.

The energy of the residual magic in the room was stifling and Will immediately understood why the enchantment was so strong. Anyone without magic that walked into this room would be completely defenseless to the pain, rage and utter despair that flooded the bedroom. Will shut his eyes and swallowed. It would take a lot of magical scrubbing to get this crime out of the walls.

He wondered if the family would try to sell. He was tired of his little apartment outside of Quantico. Thirty years of age seemed like a good time to get a house. Maybe a dog, finally, though he worried he wouldn't be able to care for one with the odd hours he kept.

This house was in the middle of nowhere. He wouldn't have to deal with neighbors questioning his well-being. He could imagine himself here, in this little white house so much like a ship on the sea of tranquility.

Opening his eyes he took in the scene. If not for the unmistakeable aura left by the magic he would have assumed it was nonmagical violence. The man lay on his back on the double bed. His eyelids had been cut and his eyes were dull and cloudy in death.

Will approached the body, bending low to look directly into the man's eyes. There had been a time people believed the eyes of the dead held the last image they saw in life. Will knew better. There was plenty to see in the eyes of the living, but the eyes of the dead held only a calm darkness. His hair had fallen over his eyes when he bent over, obscuring his vision. He tucked it behind his ears as he considered the man's face, wishing he had a rubber band. His hair was getting too long. He should probably have it cut.

The mutilation of the body was significant but far from the worst Will had seen. The man's mouth had been forced open, most likely after death but before rigor mortis had fully set in. It was stretched in an image that reminded Will of the The Scream: a wide, gaping hole in the

middle of a nondescript face. The Edvard Munch painting was said to represent the anxiety of the human condition.

Certainly the scene before him represented some kind of anxiety.

His mouth had been propped open until rigor set in in earnest in order for it to be stuck in this silent scream. Will looked more closely, but couldn't see what might have been used. It would have been something physical - there was no residual magical energy on the man's mouth. In fact, there was surprisingly little residual energy concentrated on the body at all, considering the oppressive feeling of it in the room in general.

Most of the man's tongue was gone. It had been pulled out so that what was left hung obscenely down the man's chin, the jagged edges making it clear the tongue had been torn from the body and not excised with any amount of skill. Both the tongue and the eyelids had been taken while he was still alive.

He'd been pierced in the femoral artery, the spray hitting the wall in a way that made Will think obscenely of a Pollock knock off; paint dripped or flung across the canvas in a vain attempt to recreate the artist's process.

More of then man's blood had pooled below him, soaking into the mattress and the floor beneath the bed. The severing of the artery must have occurred after the eyes and tongue. It would have been too complicated to sever the artery and then attempt their removal while the victim was still alive - or at least while he was still coherent. And there was no doubt the perpetrator wanted this man to suffer.

There was a focused anger directed at the victim. It was the sort of rage that causes a red haze around the edge of a person's vision, narrowing the field of it to only the object of that rage.

Though intense, there was nothing particularly magical about it. In fact, the killing of the man itself seemed to have no magic involved at all. It was almost as though someone with magical abilities had protected the area, setting up the crime for someone nonmagical to complete.

The man's ribs were cracked open, bones bent back to display the mostly empty chest cavity. Having donned gloves before entering the crime scene, Will removed one and placed his fingertips on the dead man's rib bones. Jack would flip when he found out, but it was the best way to sense what he was missing. He closed his eyes, concentrating on feeling instead of seeing.

The blood was already cooling and congealing. Beneath the blood he could feel the smooth strength of the bones, the cells that would normally be moving and regenerating gone dormant in death.

There was a small amount of magic in the man but as Will concentrated he began to sense something else. There was something off about the magic in the room, something about the burst of energy that had occurred to subdue the man and bind him. A lack of control. Something he had not felt in a long time.

Will opened his eyes, surprised. The magic used to subdue the man and secure the room had been stolen by the person who committed the crime. The unsub assumed he had enough power to deal with his victim magically, but he had overused what he took subduing him and had nothing left to enact the actual mutilation.

Nothing except himself, that was. The torn tongue might have suggested he was unprepared for that possibility, but he'd clearly brought tools. The eyelids were cut off and opening a ribcage the way he had was an impossibility without magic or proper equipment. But it was crudely done. The tools had certainly been a backup plan and not the original intent. The cuts lacked skill. The entire crime - both magical and nonmagical elements - had an overall lack of finesse.

The brutality of it and the extent of the mutilations were misleading. It might not be his first kill - in fact, Will was willing to bet it wasn't - but he was still new to the pastime.

The only way to temporarily wield magic was to consume the blood of a Mage. Or the flesh of someone with slight magical abilities - perhaps something so small they didn't even realize: the man who managed to guess the outcome of the Superbowl each year without knowing he had any Sight or the woman who wanted a baby girl so badly she determined the gender of her child.

He stepped back from the body. It made a bizarre kind of sense. The chest cavity was empty - heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, intestines all taken. All likely consumed or waiting to be consumed in order to absorb whatever small amount of magic this man had held. The person eating the organs would absorb and manifest it with intensity for a brief period of time; a candle flaring brightly before flickering out.

Pulling out a handkerchief to wipe his hand clean he stood to leave, replacing the glove as he did. It wouldn't do to have everyone notice he'd removed the latex in the middle of a crime scene. In the end, plenty of magically enacted crimes had still been prosecuted based on the physical evidence collected.

Most people with magic had only a small amount and only specific abilities and needed to be on-scene to wield it. It was why the OI employed people like Beverly - people with no magical inclinations, but who were very, very good at their jobs. Standing in the doorway he took one last look at the room before leaving. He was in the middle of creating a mental catalogue of the layout when he noticed the ornate mirror on the other side of the room.

How had he missed that? he wondered. The frame was tricolor gold and intricately designed. It was a floral pattern, platinum leaves and rose gold petals standing out against the traditional gold of the vines. The mirror itself was opaque. Will felt obscured as he watched himself approach, seeing only a faded image where he should have been. If he looked closely he could identify the lines of his face: where his hair fell nearly to his shoulders, the outline of his eyes, nose and mouth, the jut of his chin, his ears where they protruded slightly from beneath his hair. But there was no definition. His reflection was grey. Amorphous.

A dark mirror reflecting the worst of ourselves, Will thought sardonically. There was no reason for him to approach the mirror but he felt a strange compulsion, only registering after the fact that he was being influenced by a magic different from the residue left in the room

but every bit as powerful as his own. A small, faraway voice in his mind screamed at him to stop but he continued his approach.

Was he so enthralled he was unable to say no?

It was the excuse he would give Jack later: he hadn't been prepared for the lure of the mirror. Its magic was nothing like the magic used to commit the crime. It was alluring. Intoxicating. It was entirely organic to the owner, the draw of the mirror created with an enviable ease. Will felt a heat flood through him. He realized with no small amount of surprise that he was aroused, experiencing his own body as though he were a distant observer of its reactions.

He wasn't consciously aware of moving but he *was* aware of stopping. He stood in front of the mirror - a mirror that had no right to be in this room - and considered the dark version of himself reflected back. Its lips curled into a cruel grin and Will inhaled sharply. He removed his glove, unable to keep himself from reaching out. He wanted - no *needed* - to touch that smooth, dark plane of glass.

As soon as his fingertips hit the mirror the room was plunged into darkness. His vision narrowed to a single point of light, a shiver running through him as he realized it was only growing larger because he was falling toward it, powerless to stop the inexorable draw of something he couldn't yet identify.

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When Will was in the first grade he turned his teacher into a crane. Not the actual bird - though he would have enjoyed one with feathers - but the origami version. He'd watched in fascination as she was stretched into a flat plane, her arms and legs fusing on either side, her stomach pulled and extended, her head elongating. She screamed in pain until the sounds would no longer come. Once she was silent the sheet of stretched clothes, skin, muscle and hair that had been his teacher began to fold in on itself, slowly at first but then faster and faster until finally the movement stopped. An origami crane sat on the teacher's desk, one elongated eye blinking at them but otherwise unnaturally still.

Reactions from his classmates were varied: some screamed, some cried, one fainted. A few watched, awed like Will, but only Will stood and approached the crane once it stilled. He reached out to touch, his hand resting on the fold that was the beak and had formerly been part of his teacher's nose. It was an elegantly executed transfiguration, but he hadn't known that at the time. He only knew that the crane was warm to the touch. Its surface still felt soft like skin.

Will was astonished. He'd been bored. He'd learned to fold an origami crane the week before - something his Aunt taught him - and had imagined his teacher as a bird. Now she was.

The principle walked in as Will was stroking down the beak. His classmates' eyes all flew to the door as it opened, but Will's eyes stayed on the crane. He turned eventually, blinking in surprise as the older woman entered the room. At first he struggled to think of why she would be there - but of course she'd heard the screams and had come to investigate.

“Graham,” she said, her voice shrill with fear, “step away. You have no idea what might happen.”

He knew nothing would happen but he stepped back anyway, looking down at the floor to avoid the hardness of her eyes. Mrs. Maddox was not mean, exactly. Hers was a blunt fairness that was generally respected but did not endear her to any of the children. Will felt small in her presence. He imagined himself shrinking, but unlike when his teacher turned into a crane, he did not change size.

Almost no local law enforcement agencies had supernatural investigative services at the time and Montgomery was no exception. The incident was investigated by the SIS - the FBI’s occult arm and what would later become the OIU. It was a silly acronym if Will had ever heard one: “Supernatural Investigative Section”. Everyone wore matching black suits and ties. Most of them had dark hair and all of them had short haircuts. They all looked so alike, so nondescript, that it was difficult to tell them apart.

Will thought that was probably the point.

He also thought the FBI was very boring.

They interviewed all the students in his class but spent the most time with him, asking him the same questions again and again. He was the only one who’d touched his teacher in crane form.

He was curious, he told them. He wanted to know what she felt like. If she still felt like his teacher. (She did.)

They tried to make meaningful eye contact with him. He knew they were doing it “to establish trust.” But Will hated eye contact. When he looked into people’s eyes he saw things. There wasn’t anything he could make out - it was more like a series of images behind dark glass - but the suggestion was enough. It was as though all their hopes, fears and anxieties appeared in their eyes.

The more the SIS agents attempted eye contact, the more Will looked away.

They asked what he saw happen to his teacher; if there was anything unusual he saw before it happened or if he recalled hearing anything strange immediately before it started. They asked if he’d seen anyone new around the school. They asked how he felt. *Tired of being asked questions.* They asked how it started. Again. Will mostly shrugged in response.

They never asked why a crane and they never asked if he did it, so he never told them what he knew to be true: he had. He pictured it and it became reality.

Will learned later that they never brought it up because they never considered it a possibility. Magic rarely presented before 16 and there were no documented cases younger than 11. Will had started school early and was still four months shy of his seventh birthday.

There was some discussion that it could have been one of the older students at the school, which housed up to grade 7. But the magic, if not completely refined, was elegant enough

that the consensus of the experts was that it was not a student at the school. They estimated someone in their late teens or early twenties, someone still immature but with at least *some* magical training.

Certainly there was no possibility that a six year old boy with no training had transfigured his teacher using nothing more than the force of his imagination. The thought would have been laughable had anyone been foolish enough to suggest it.

In the end, a Mage was able to set the teacher to rights and the investigation was closed without any fault having been determined. The teacher left the school and never came back.

Will felt guilty about it. Ms. Mitchell was nice and smelled like cinnamon. He'd liked her, even if she was more interesting as a crane.

***

Will hadn't realized his eyes were closed until he opened them. The room he was standing in was dark. Four walls - a square, not a rectangle - and no doors. What small amount of light there was came from a single candle in the center of a table itself positioned in the middle of the room. The candle was in an antique looking silver candle holder; it sat low in the holder, surrounded by a small basin with a ring on the side as a finger hold. Will imagined a little boy wearing a white shift and cap carrying the candle stealthily from room to room, a mischievous smile on his face.

The table also appeared old. It was a small square table made of a wood Will couldn't identify, built simply and likely for function rather than aesthetic. There were no chairs. He approached the table slowly, laying his ungloved hand on the wood and grazing his fingertips across the rough texture of the table top. It wasn't particularly sturdy, the table shifting under his hand and the flame of the candle pursuing the movement. Either the maker lacked practice or the table was even older than it appeared.

Pressing his hand flat against the top of the table to still the movement, Will glanced above him. The ceiling was the same color as the walls, though it was difficult to tell exactly what color that was in the low light. A dark blue, most likely. The consistent color created an odd, oppressive feeling. Though the ceiling was quite high - much too high for Will to touch even when stretching himself as tall as possible and pushing up onto his toes - it felt lower.

In the center of the ceiling, directly above the candle, was a small circular mirror. Unlike the mirror at the crime scene it had no frame. It was a simple plane of mirrored glass placed on the flat surface of the ceiling.

Like the mirror at the crime scene the reflection in it was opaque. Will made out the flickering light of the candle, so dull it appeared almost black. The table beneath it was the same as the one in the room, but in the mirror it appeared larger and was laden with food. There were a variety of meats and vegetables: Will thought he recognized a turkey, a few varietals of squash, possibly a beet dish, and potatoes. On the opposite side of the table was a roast he couldn't identify. It was covered in some kind of leaves and tied with twine. At first he thought it was an animal shank, but as he continued to look he was able to make out the shape of a decidedly human foot.

The leg was set directly in front of the one chair placed at the table. Seated in that chair was a figure. It was an inky blue-black color that Will could tell had nothing to do with the darkness of the mirror. The skin appeared thick, closer to a hide than human flesh. There were antlers sprouting from the being's head; a mature, multi-pronged set, covered in a reddish-brown velvet.

Will could feel magic emanating from the being at the table and felt heat running through him. It was the same magic Will had felt from the mirror: want, desire, *lust*. It was primal. Old. He was breathing more rapidly and he focused on controlling his body's reactions. Whoever this being was, he was powerful. Will wasn't certain if he'd created the mirror or if he was bonded to it. Or trapped in it. Though if he was trapped, the trap was failing and his magic was leeching into the world beyond.

The figure looked up, its blood red eyes locking with Will's. If there was anything to see in the creature's eyes it was thankfully obscured by the mirror. Beyond the skin, antlers, and red eyes its features were humanoid. It tilted its head in a clear display of curiosity. Will took a cautious step back, not breaking eye contact. The creature's mouth opened, morphing into a grin that displayed two rows of teeth that narrowed to the sharp points of a needle. They almost appeared to have been filed, but something told Will they were natural. A low rumble sounded through the room. It was laughing.

Will recoiled, falling abruptly to the floor and moving quickly backward until he hit the wall. He took a deep breath, flicking his eyes to the table in front of him. It was unchanged: a single candle burning low, no food resting on its surface, no chair on the other side, and, most importantly, no creature grinning wildly and laughing. Will inhaled deeply, calming his breath.

He hadn't encountered magic this powerful in a long time - possibly ever. It was ancient and completely untamed. Will couldn't help the shudder that ran through him, equal parts thrilled and fearful.

Standing, his eyes moved to the mirror in the ceiling once more but he was disappointed to find it was empty. Or rather, it showed nothing more than a reflection of the room as it was. The room and mirror were also completely devoid of magic. What Will had felt came from the creature, not the objects.

Will slouched against the wall, closing his eyes and breathing deeply. He wasn't certain where he was, what meaning there might be behind this room, or the purpose of the mirror. But he knew he was inside it, somehow, and he needed to get out. He sighed, steeling himself for what was to come. He was tired and returning was going to take all of his strength.

***

When Will was ten he set his school on fire.

He was, once again, the new kid in school. They'd arrived in town before the school year started. At least he got to start with the other kids. When his father attempted to enroll Will in the fifth grade instead of the fourth, the school insisted on testing him before placement. The outcome was that he was placed in the sixth grade. His father was thrilled.

Will, on the other hand, was less than thrilled. He was glad not to be bored in his classes, but part of the agreement was that he had to see the school guidance counselor twice a week. As it turned out, the school was concerned not only with his intellect but his emotional well-being as well. They wanted someone to help him with the social challenges that come with being two years younger and therefore quite a bit smaller than your classmates.

“I don’t want to see him,” Will complained.

“It’s part of the agreement, Billy,” his father said. Will hated when his father called him ‘Billy’. He scowled. He was Will - not Billy, Bill, Willy or William. He thought people should call him the name he liked best, not the one they did.

“I don’t need to see him,” Will continued, not letting up. He might only be ten but he was no fool about what he wanted or needed. “Kids don’t think I’m weird cause of my age, Daddy. I’m used to it. I don’t need to talk about it.”

But Will’s father merely shook his head and repeated that it was part of the agreement, and Will resigned himself to going. He appeared at the guidance counselor’s office promptly at 3:40pm, as instructed, knocked lightly on the door and waited.

It was eventually answered by an extremely overweight older gentleman. His silver hair was disheveled, his eyes bloodshot and a red flush spread across his cheeks and nose. He smelled of stale coffee and Will felt a near-instant dislike for him.

“William Graham?” he asked.

“Will,” Will corrected.

“Mr. Beaufort.” He gestured into his office. “Please, come in William.”

Will scowled as he walked past the man. Beneath the scent of old coffee was the unmistakable sour smell of whiskey. It was the same smell his father often had, and one of the reasons they had moved so many times. The office was messy: papers sprawled across the desk, books on the floor, a rumpled shirt hanging on the back of the door. The shirt the counselor was wearing was equally wrinkled. Before Will knocked Mr. Beaufort had probably been asleep at his desk.

This man was supposed to help him cope with his peers. Will would have laughed, but he didn’t want to have to explain to the man why he was laughing.

Instead, he set his backpack down next to an uncomfortable looking wooden chair, clearly intended for guests, and took a seat. He watched as Mr. Beaufort seated himself on the opposite side of the desk, practically collapsing into the leather rolling chair. The bulk of the man was such that he had to sit back from the desk and he was wheezing from the simple exertion of going to and from his office door. Even a ten year old could see he was not healthy.

Will folded his hands primly in his lap, sat up very straight, and waited.

“So, William. Tell me about your day.”

Will narrowed his eyes. That was it? Tell me about your day? He stared at the man, silent.

“You know why you’re here, right William?” Mr Beaufort asked. There was a tiredness in his voice. He didn’t want to explain to Will why they’d been forced to have these meetings. Meetings he clearly didn’t want to have any more than Will did. Will had the sudden insight that he had to explain that to other children he met with - why it was a requirement that they show up to his office at specific times - and he was hoping that a kid he’d been told was intelligent wouldn’t need to hear it.

Will nodded. “I’d rather be called Will than William, please,” he said politely.

“Ok. I can call you that.” His voice was gruff but Will was Listening and he wasn’t angry. Will had discovered if he Listened closely enough he could hear the meaning behind the words. He couldn’t do it all the time, though, because it was tiring and grownups so rarely said what they meant.

“There isn’t much to tell you about my day,” Will said, shrugging.

“It can be general, it doesn’t need to be specific. Was it good? Bad? Did you make any friends?”

Will snorted at the last question. “I never make friends, Mr. Beaufort.”

The guidance counselor nodded kindly. Maybe he wasn’t so bad, actually, though Will was still sure he wouldn’t be any help. “I’m sure it’s difficult when you’re much younger than your classmates.”

Will sighed, threading his fingers together and looking down at his hands. “It’s not because of my age.”

He’d been mostly avoiding eye contact since he was very small and was almost always sorry when he didn’t. Especially since, as he got older, he saw more in people’s eyes. Once he’d seen his second grade teacher tied to a bed, naked, while a woman in leather whipped him. Will didn’t understand and tried to warn his teacher, whose face turned several shades of red before he asked Will where he’d heard such a nasty rumor.

His teacher must have been too embarrassed to report it, because the school never said anything. Will tried to bring it up to his father at the time, but his father wanted to know who’d been telling him things a seven year old shouldn’t hear about. And how do you explain to your father that you looked in someone’s eyes and saw their secret? In the end his Aunt tried to explain - something about consenting adults and “you’ll understand when you’re older” - but Will wasn’t so sure. Now that he was a few years older he knew it was something sexual, but he still didn’t really get it. Adults seemed to like sex a lot. Will thought it was gross.

Especially after that he avoided eye contact as much as possible. But he looked up now, meeting the guidance counselor’s eyes with a steady gaze of his own.

Mr. Beaufort wasn't all that interesting, it turned out. He saw a bottle of the same whiskey his father liked to drink and a half empty glass, a quiet house with empty spaces on the walls where there used to be pictures, and a cat that sat on Mr Beaufort's lap while he drank.

The cat was a bit of a surprise. Will averted his gaze and looked at his guidance counselor's hands. His ring finger was a solid color, with no tell-tale band of lighter skin. But if Will Looked hard enough he could see the gold ring that used to be there.

"What's your cat's name?" Will asked.

Mr. Beaufort sat up, startled. "How did you know I had a cat?"

Will shrugged. Looking at his sleeve, the counselor seemed to decide Will had seen hair on his clothes.

"My cat's name is Aphrodite," he said. "Do you have any pets, Will?"

"Can I meet her sometime?" Will asked. Mr. Beaufort watched him, his eyes clearing with sudden curiosity.

"Maybe," he said. "Will you answer my question?"

Will looked at his hands again. "I like dogs, but Daddy said we move too much."

"Is that why you have trouble making friends? Because of how often you move?"

"No," Will said coldly. He shivered. The room was suddenly chilly, and Mr Beaufort was looking at him curiously again.

"Then why, do you think?"

"Other kids think I'm weird," Will said softly. "They don't like to be around me." He was silent for a moment, watching Mr. Beaufort watch him but not meeting his eyes. "It's better when they ignore me anyway," he said, finally. Some days he could feel himself fading, as though he were invisible. It was easier on those days, because the other kids didn't look at him.

"Did they ignore you today?" Mr. Beaufort asked, gently.

"I pretended to blend into the wall," Will said. "And they all walked around me. No one said anything, so it was a good day."

Mr. Beaufort nodded, still looking at Will with a curious expression. He didn't ask any more questions about school, though, and Will was grateful. Instead they talked about Will's favorite types of dogs and how he would walk to the park down the street from his house so that he could see people walking their dogs and sometimes pet them.

There were a lot of things Will didn't like, but dogs were always soft and nice. They didn't have secrets they were trying to hide and they didn't think he was weird. They were happy to

be pet, even by the small, scrawny kid with too bright eyes and too long hair that his father never bothered to have cut.

Will left thinking it might even have been sort of nice to talk to Mr. Beaufort.

He changed his mind the next day when the men in suits came to talk to him. It was the same people that came when he turned Ms. Mitchell into a crane. He thought some of the agents might even be the same, but it was hard to tell.

There was one that was new, though. He was younger than everyone else and his skin was darker. He told Will his name was Jack. None of the other agents told Will their names.

Jack talked to Will while they waited for his father to arrive. They talked about dogs, which Will liked, and then they talked about Mr. Beaufort, which Will didn't like. Mr. Beaufort must have told them Will was weird, just like his classmates thought, or the people in suits wouldn't be talking to him. But Jack was nice enough and when Will snuck a quick look at his eyes he saw excitement and hope, but no specific secret. Will Listened very hard while Jack was talking, but unlike most adults when he said something he meant what he said.

Will could tell there were a lot of things he wasn't saying, though, and eventually Will got tired of wondering about the unasked questions and stopped responding to the ones Jack *was* asking.

Jack changed the subject. "How about some ice cream while we wait for your dad? I'm told they have some in the kitchen here."

Will felt an odd prickling sensation at the back of his skull. Something told him to say yes, even though he didn't want any. "No, thank you," he said instead.

"A kid that doesn't like ice cream?" Jack asked, looking at him with an expression Will couldn't quite understand but definitely didn't like.

"I like ice cream." His Aunt used to make ice cream. She had a wooden bucket with a metal handle to churn it. They would put fruit and cream in a metal container on the inside, then salt and ice on the outside between the container and the wood, and they would churn it for what felt like hours. It was the most delicious ice cream Will had ever eaten. They made peach, strawberry, pineapple, vanilla, and pear. His Aunt said the best thing about homemade ice cream was that you could make flavors you couldn't get at the grocery store. She made cherry amaretto for her and Will's father once. She told Will it was adult ice cream, but she'd still snuck him a taste.

But that had been when he was little, before they started moving around for his father's work. Will hadn't seen his Aunt or made ice cream since he was seven. He'd only eaten it a few times since then. Ice cream was good, but it also made him sad.

"I don't want any ice cream right now," Will snapped. They'd been sitting in the teacher's lounge for over an hour. He'd been pulled out of class in front of all the other students - which definitely didn't make him any less weird - and he wanted to go back to class or go home. He also wanted to go to the bathroom.

He asked one of the people in suits if he could leave, only to be told he would be escorted. That annoyed Will. He didn't need someone to walk him to the bathroom, but it was clear they weren't go to let him by himself. In the end he agreed to the escort and made his way down the hall, one of the suits trailing behind. He was glad they didn't walk next to him.

It was the middle of sixth period but there were still a few other kids in the hallway. Some had hall passes. A few were wandering around during their free period instead of doing homework.

None of them would look at Will. They probably wouldn't have anyway, but it was worse with the suits there. Will hunched over, feeling very small.

He stared at himself in the bathroom mirror. His eyes were dark the way they always were when he was angry. He'd known Mr. Beaufort wasn't going to be able to help him when they talked, but he'd thought the counselor might actually try to be his friend.

Instead Mr. Beaufort said something that caused all the people in black suits to show up. He wasn't sure how much longer he and his father would be in this city - he hoped not for long - but while they were he didn't want to come back to this school. Will felt his eyes prickle with tears and he swallowed harshly.

Maybe the school would burn down and then he wouldn't have to come back. The image of it flashed before his eyes: flames rising steadily from the top of the school, running down the walls and searing into the grass surrounding the building. All the carefully trimmed bushes would be disintegrated, no more than piles of ashes in front of stone walls that had previously been a palace of learning. Will smiled darkly. It would be beautiful.

He'd already washed his hands, but he washed them again for good measure before leaving the bathroom. He hoped his father would get to the school soon. He would make the suits leave Will alone.

As he stepped back out into the hallway the alarm went off, then the sprinklers. Will and the suit that had followed him looked at each other. The man in the suit took Will's hand. His hand was soft and warm and made Will feel inexplicably safe, even though he wasn't sure it should. The suit didn't speak, but held Will's hand firmly as they made their way outside to the track where teachers were taking headcount.

Will stood still, allowing himself to be counted, and saw Jack coming over to him. He didn't speak and for a while neither did Jack. They both stood quietly, watching the flames rise from the attic of the school.

"Do you think the school deserves to burn to the ground, Will?" Jack asked, as everyone - teachers, students, Will and all the people in suits - stood on the track field, watching the orange flames licking over the grey roof.

Will shook his head. He hadn't meant to do it, exactly. He'd been upset, but he hadn't tried to start the fire. It just happened.

“But you’re not upset that it’s burning,” Jack said. Will could feel the other man’s eyes on him.

He looked up, focusing his bright blue eyes on Jack’s left ear. “I won’t be sorry if I don’t have to come back here,” he said

“The school’s just a building, Will,” Jack said. “Does it deserve your anger?”

Will said nothing, lifting his thumb to his mouth and biting his knuckle.

He thought maybe he should feel sorry about the building, but if Jack believed he could stop the fire he was wrong. He *thought* about it stopping, leaving a hole in the roof but nothing else. But the flames didn’t stop. They continued moving steadily to engulf more and more of the school.

It was a beautiful building; old, with ornamental designs carved into the white window frames and trusses. It was made of a lovely red brick, but that probably wouldn’t burn. The floors would, though. The walls would. Already part of the roof was caving in. Will realized he did feel a little sad watching it, but mostly he was glad he wouldn’t have to go back in the morning.

When Will’s father finally showed up, Jack pulled him aside. The two of them kept looking at him and Will tried hard to hear what they were saying but couldn’t. He felt suddenly very tired, and he sank down to his knees before falling over onto his side. The last thing he remembered was his father’s worried face and Jack’s curious one immediately behind.

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Will was sweating and breathing heavily when he reappeared in the dead man’s bedroom. He was standing in front of the mirror in roughly the same position he’d been when he first touched it. It hadn’t been his intent to return to this moment, but he’d been focused on getting back and he supposed in his fatigue he’d concentrated on this specific image and moment in time.

His hand was resting on the mirror and he removed it, placing it on the wall instead as he caught his breath. The room he’d been in might not have felt magical, but wherever it existed was surrounded by a thick magical barrier. It hadn’t been an enchantment in the traditional sense – nothing like what the mages of the OI set up as a parameter for their crime scenes – but more like a wall of sorrow. For the briefest of moments Will had given into despair and the thought that we would never leave the mirror before rebuilding the forts in his mind and pressing forward. It was like walking through quicksand, every movement slow and agonizing.

It was most certainly some kind of cage, but Will still wasn’t certain if it had been created by or for the creature. Regardless of the original intent, the creature had power over it. If it had been created to hold him it was failing. And if not - if it had been created by the creature as a trap for others - how had it remained unknown for so long? The OI had a vast repertoire of magical items, housed safely in their underground vault. Or as safely as they could be.

Will considered himself a realist. Nothing was impenetrable and, when it came to magic, there was no completely safe location.

As he caught his breath he realized he was shivering. He'd overexerted himself and he was behind the perimeter with all his defenses depleted. It wouldn't be long before the enchantment started impacting him. He could feel it already, like thousands of tiny pinpricks against his skin. He felt the artistry of it as the magic washed over him. It was the work of several mages' magic, but whoever directed the creation had masterfully woven the different influences into a cohesive final version.

He allowed himself a moment to appreciate it. The feeling of it working against him toed the line between pain and pleasure; the ache of it as it settled into his skin and began to work was a new experience he catalogued with interest before forcing himself to focus. He had to get out of the house or he would be rendered unconscious. And if he did collapse behind the line it might be some time before the others onsite realized anything was wrong. His defenses were normally so strong Will was known for spending extended periods of time behind the perimeter - much longer than anyone else reasonably could.

He took a deep, shuddering breath and turned to leave. His legs felt like lead, and it was with no small amount of effort that he took a step forward – only to feel strong fingers grip his hips, keeping him in place.

Fear did not hit immediately.

It was confusion, first, and then a rush of sensation. Untamed want. Lust. Desired-based magic. The hands on his hips were hot. He hadn't expected them to be so warm, but each finger was like a brand against his skin. The cold talons that existed instead of fingernails pressed against his skin but did not pierce it, although Will knew they could slice through his flesh with the same ease and precision as any scalpel.

The creature moved its hand from his right hip, pressing its forearm against his chest and pulling him backward with a surprising gentleness so that their bodies were flush, his back against the creature's warm chest. The creature shifted its arm higher, wrapping those long fingers around Will's neck; thumb directly beneath his jawbone, one talon resting behind his ear, the others resting against the nape of his neck.

His first instinct was to relax into the grip, and he fought the urge to turn and press himself more fully into the creature. He knew he was reacting to its magic and tried to concentrate on breathing, but the creature was slowly increasing the strength of its grip on his neck and cutting off his oxygen little by little.

"Mine," the creature whispered in his ear, its forked tongue licking up the side of Will's neck. Its voice was a growl; low and guttural. A shiver of misplaced pleasure ran down his spine. He felt a soothing vibration against his back and realized the creature was purring.

"Mine," the creature said again. It was more predatory this time, the creature pressing them more fully together and pressing harder still against Will's neck. It was hard to breathe, hard to think, but Will registered they were moving backward.

“No,” he croaked. To his surprise the creature stopped, the pressure of its hand and arm releasing enough that Will gasped, drawing air in deep and wincing at the pain.

“I have been waiting for you,” the creature said, its slick tongue flicking into Will’s ear. “Your magic called to me and I came.” The creature’s grip on him tightened again and Will realized he was going to be taken if he didn’t do something.

Fear hit then. He tried to scream, tried to shake his head. His feet left the floor and he kicked vainly, flailing like a child. Breathing was becoming more and more difficult and his vision was going black at edges. He kicked harder, making contact with the creature’s legs and attempting to scream. The creature removed its other hand from his hip and pressed its talons roughly through his shoulder, piercing the skin and muscle with ease.

Will did scream, then, a howl that was both the shock of the pain and the lustful pleasure of the creature’s magic settling into the skin around the wound. Will grit his teeth. He had to get away. He had to. If he didn’t, the creature was going to do something terrible with him.

Witnesses described it later as a sudden vibration that radiated outward from the house, neutralizing the enchanted perimeter, destroying anything electronic and sending everyone standing outside to the ground. A column of white light shot up from the bedroom, stretching into the sky with a near blinding intensity. It only lasted a moment before disappearing, leaving a void of darkness behind it; an inky blackness that light refused to penetrate.

They would ask what he’d done and how, but Will wasn’t certain. He’d reacted out of instinct for self-preservation. He only knew that the creature was gone, he was laying on the floor and his body was on fire, burning from the inside out.

He could still feel the creature distantly. It had been surprised, and in that surprise there was a warm feeling of genuine pride. No one had surprised the creature in a long time. But beneath that there was an undercurrent of sadness. A deep hollow feeling that came from a long held loneliness, a feeling so familiar it had become comforting in its own way. The desire for connection where there was none. The pain of rejection.

I am going to die alone, Will thought, as the world before him went black.

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Will’s bedroom was too hot and his clothes were damp and clinging to him. He shoved the covers down and thought about opening the window. It was fall, which meant it was cooling off outside even in Biloxi, and the air would be nice. He could almost feel it: the soft breeze soothing his too warm skin. He sat up to open the window, only to realize it was already open. Will smiled. The breeze did feel nice.

Through the open window he could hear his father’s voice, as well as another man’s. Jack.

“You’re not taking my boy, Mr. Crawford,” Will’s father said. “I’m all he’s got and he’s all I got.”

“No other family?” Jack asked.

“No, sir,” Mr. Graham said gruffly. “All passed. It’s just me and the boy.”

Jack made a humming noise, and Will could hear the curiosity behind it. He must know that wasn’t the truth - Will still had his Aunt, after all - but he didn’t comment on the lie.

“He needs training,” Jack said. “Guidance.”

“What he needs, Mr Crawford, is for you to leave him alone and not study him.”

Will couldn’t see them from his window, but he knew Jack was shaking his head.

“That’s not what I want for him, Mr. Graham. But he needs to be trained. He doesn’t know how to control it.” Jack’s voice was kind, but there was an urgent pressure in the statement that made the space behind Will’s eyes ache.

“They say if you don’t encourage it, it goes away,” Will’s father said quietly. “Will’s not a normal boy, even without this. But he’s a good boy, Mr. Crawford. He’s my boy.”

“Do you think this is going to go away, Mr. Graham?” Will felt Jack’s dark eyes staring up at his window, even though he knew Jack couldn’t see it from where they were sitting on the porch. Will could picture them. His father had made them both coffee and secretly (not so secretly) added a bit of whiskey to his because he needed the liquid courage to talk to this man after what he’d said at the school. Jack sat so that he was facing Will’s father, but he was looking at Will.

Will backed away from the window, not wanting to be seen. The men fell silent and Will sat back down on his bed. He was breathing heavily and his heart was beating too fast. Jack wanted to take him away. And Will knew he would eventually have to go.

He could see his father on the porch: his weathered skin and tired eyes, his hair that had once been the same color as Will’s graying at the temples. He was a tall, sturdy man, if a little too soft and broad around the middle due to the whiskey. Blue eyes, not quite the same shade as Will’s but close. The same nose except for the permanent alcoholic flush across it.

Proud. He always held himself tall and told Will to stand up straight. He never took charity. No matter how little they had, he worked for what they needed. But Will saw his sadness, too. His fear. He wanted to be a father to Will but he knew he wasn’t good at it. He wasn’t prepared to deal with Will’s strangeness or his unusual gifts.

Will saw the way his father pursed his lips, considering Jack’s question. When he answered, his voice was surprisingly soft.

“No. It’s not going to go away.”

Will cried then, hot tears that burned his cheeks, despite the fact that he knew his father would tell him to “man up.” His father hated tears.

But Will couldn’t help it. His father was going to give him up. He would let Jack take him away. Will didn’t want to go, but he didn’t want to be there anymore. He wanted to be somewhere else. Anywhere else.

They hadn't been back to Montgomery since he was seven, but Will closed his eyes and pictured the lake they used to visit. He ran his hand over the stone wall, feeling the smoothness of the river rock that stayed cool even under the summer sun. He felt the warm breeze on his face and smelled the slightly stagnant scent of the lake water. They'd gone to fish a few times, as did many other people in the area.

Will could almost see them: him, his father and his Aunt on their way to the lake. But when he looked more closely at the memory he only saw himself and his father.

Hadn't his Aunt gone with them?

But she wasn't in the memory, it was only the two of them. "Daddy," Will said, his blue eyes excited, "some day I'm going to be the best fisherman. I'll catch us fish for dinner every night."

His father was smiling. Happy. They had been happy and then something had happened. "You keep practicing, Billy," his father said, "and you can do anything you set your mind on."

"Billy?" there was a knock at his bedroom door.

Right, he was still in his bedroom.

"Billy?" the voice sounded more urgent and farther away. Will knew he should open his eyes and open the door, but he didn't want to see Jack or his father. He didn't want to be told he was being taken.

"William! Open this door, son," his father said. His voice was angry but distant, like he was yelling from a long way away. Something was wrong.

Will opened his eyes. His bedroom was gone and it was night. He was at the lake, running his hand across the wall of river rocks, headed toward the wooden walkway that led out over the water. He was alone.

He closed his eyes. It wasn't real. He was only remembering, and when he opened his eyes he would be back in his bedroom in their little house in Biloxi. But when he opened his eyes nothing had changed. He was still at the park, it was was still dark, and he was still alone. Will walked to a small bench and sat, curling into himself and wrapping his arms around his legs. He didn't know what to do. He felt very small and terribly lonely.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," he whispered into his knees as tears stained his jeans. *Those tears aren't worth the salt you're spending, Billy,* his father's voice sounded in his head. But Will only cried harder.

"You alright?"

Will startled, not looking up. The voice was brittle but kind. He wasn't alright, but he didn't know how to explain what had happened. It wasn't polite not to acknowledge the voice but he wasn't sure how he should respond, so he stayed still.

“You here by yourself?” the voice asked, coming closer. Will raised his head slightly, catching sight of a blue shirt and the wrinkled arms of someone who spent too much time in the sun. He traced the arms down to hands that were gripping tightly to a walker. “S’okay, honey,” the voice continued. “I don’t bite.”

Lifting his head to face the voice, Will saw a head of gray hair and dark eyes surrounded by laugh lines. The woman’s face broke into a wide, toothy smile. “Such pretty blue eyes,” she said, lowering herself with agonizing slowness so that she sat next to Will on the bench. “What are you doing out here all alone, blue eyes? You lost? Running away?”

Still unsure what to say, Will watched her for a moment before responding. It was a bit of both, if he was being honest. “Lost,” he said.

The woman nodded. “There someone you can call? There’s a payphone not too far from here. I’ve got a quarter for you if you need it.”

“I don’t know her phone number,” Will said softly, hating the feeling of tears rising behind his eyes once more. The woman placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. Will flinched out of habit, but her hand was surprisingly soft for how wrinkled it was. He could feel her fingers curled against his back, her knuckles large and misshapen from arthritis. But she was warm, and she was kind.

“I’m gonna take you to the police station, blue eyes,” she said gently. “I know you probably don’t wanna go, but they’ll be able to help you find your people.” She stood with that same agonizing slowness, gripping her walker and pulling herself up inch by inch with a low groan. Movement clearly hurt her, but she turned and smiled at Will once she was standing.

“It’s a shame to get old, blue eyes,” she said, “but as long as these bones’ll still move, I make ‘em move.” Will smiled back at her in spite of himself, wiping his eyes self-consciously.

“Name’s Grace,” she said. She didn’t extend her hand, instead holding tightly to the walker.

“Will.”

“That’s a good name for you, blue eyes,” she said. “Where there’s a Will, there’s a way, right?” Her laugh was more of a cackle, but pleasant nonetheless. They made their way slowly to the car, Grace breathing heavily and grunting softly with each step. Will wondered why she was out walking and how she was going to drive. She laughed again, the same brittle crackling sound, glancing to her side to eye him with amusement. “Don’t worry blue eyes,” she said. “I drive better than I walk."

As it turned out Grace drove much better than she walked, because she didn’t have to use her legs. She had something attached to her steering wheel that let her do everything with her hands.

The police station was not far from the lake. They were mostly quiet during the short drive, but it was a pleasant sort of quiet. Will didn’t feel concerned at all, no matter what his father had told him about accepting rides from strangers. When they arrived Grace insisted on going in with him. “I can’t leave you alone yet, blue eyes,” she said.

Will helped her out of the car, pulling her walker from the backseat and positioning it so she could pull herself out with it. He wondered how she got out of the car by herself. She asked for the sergeant when they walked in and told him Will was lost and looking for his family. Will told them his Aunt lived in the area, reluctantly gave them his father's number in Biloxi, and then settled down to wait, accepting a soda and a small bag of peanuts from one of the patrol officers.

Grace patted him on the shoulder. "I'm gonna go now, blue eyes," she said. "But my boy here's gonna take good care of you." She pointed at the sergeant, who smiled at her in response. Will nodded nervously. He hadn't expected to feel comfortable in a police station, but with Grace there it felt ok. He wasn't sure how it would feel when she left. He bit at the knuckle of his thumb, holding his soda can tightly in the other hand.

"Thank you," he said. He wanted to do something for her. Reaching out he rested his fingertips lightly on her hand, thinking how nice it would be if she didn't hurt so much. She gasped and flexed her hand, giving Will a strange look.

"Blue eyes," she said, stopping abruptly. She took a deep breath. "Will. Good luck to you honey." She grabbed her walker and stood, barely emitting a groan when she did, and kissed him on the forehead before heading out the front door.

When they couldn't find his Aunt - Will wondered if maybe she'd moved - they called his father to come collect him. It was just over a three hour drive from Biloxi to Montgomery. Will would be waiting for a while.

He dropped a few peanuts into his can of coke, wishing they had bottles instead. When he finished the first can he asked politely at the desk if he could have another, and a female officer with brown hair and green eyes got him one. Will thought she was pretty and smiled shyly when she handed him the can. She.talked to him for a few minutes before going back to work. The other officers mostly left him alone, checking in on him from time to time to make sure he was ok. If they thought it was odd that a ten year old from Biloxi had somehow ended up in Montgomery they didn't say anything.

A few of them watched when Will's father and Jack showed up to collect him. They tried to pretend that they weren't paying attention, but Will could tell they were. They watched as Will's father, never a hugger, pulled him tightly to his chest and Jack proclaimed that Will was "amazing" and "incredible."

Despite drinking two cans of coke, Will feel asleep in the car not long after they left. He didn't want to, especially with Jack in the car, but he was too tired not to.

He tried not to think of it as a ride home. He doubted he'd be there much longer.

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Awareness returned slowly. It was sounds first: feet shuffling across the floor, the rustling of papers, people speaking in hushed voices. He couldn't quite make out the words, the sounds rising and falling in a pattern that was familiar but without meaning. In the distance he heard someone coughing. A consistent beeping sounded near his right ear: a heart monitor. He was

in the hospital, he realized, before consciousness slipped away once more.

When he rose to consciousness for the second time he became aware of more sensations: the scratch of the hospital gown on his skin, the pressure of the sheet covering him, the IV connected to his arm, the pulse oximeter clamped to his finger. He could still hear the heart monitor, beeping in a constant rhythm. He supposed that meant his heart was still working, at least. The chuckle that rose in his throat quickly became a cough.

He turned his head and saw a figure approaching his bed. For one brief moment it was the creature, approaching his bed with a predatory grace. Its blue-black skin swallowed the harsh lights of the hospital room as its blood-red eyes bored into Will. It grinned, flashing its teeth.

Will could hear the increase in his heart rate as the creature came closer, but as Will's eyes flicked up to its antlers he saw only empty space. Lowering his gaze once more he realized there was no creature. What stood before him was a man.

The man brushed a strand of sandy-blond hair out of his eyes with a flicker of irritation that suggested his hair was rarely out of place. He was regarding Will with a look of open curiosity, his lips pursed in a way that pressed his upper lip forward and made him appear almost petulant.

"You're awake," the man said. His voice was pleasantly accented and Will felt unaccountably soothed hearing it. He'd only said two words. Will wondered if the man was using magic, but he didn't feel anything. Maybe he wasn't capable of sensing it anymore. Maybe he'd expended all his magic escaping the creature.

He wasn't certain how he felt about that possibility.

Will nodded at the man, not trusting his voice. He could tell it would be hoarse from disuse without bothering to try speaking. He wondered how long he'd been there. The man picked up a glass of water from the side table and positioned the straw to Will's mouth.

"Slowly," he said. Will did as he was told, taking small sips and pausing between each one, grateful for the feeling of the tepid liquid coating his mouth and throat. He drank nearly half the glass that way before pulling his head back from the straw and trying to smile, hoping his gratitude was clear.

The man set the glass down and placed a hand on Will's forehead. It was clinical but not unkind, although Will was unsure of the purpose. Surely something he was presently hooked up to was monitoring his temperature. There should be no need for this man to touch him to see if he was warm.

But Will had to admit he liked the feel of the man's hand on his forehead. It was soothing in a way that was similar to his voice; soft and cool like a dip in the clear waters of a river or a gentle breeze on a warm summer's day. Will closed his eyes, swallowed roughly, and opened them again, focusing on the man.

"Who," he croaked, the rest of the sentence catching in his throat.

“Forgive me, Mr. Graham,” the man said. “It was quite rude of me not to introduce myself. I am Dr. Hannibal Lecter, and it’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will watched as Dr. Lecter moved to the base of the bed, pulling his chart and making some notes. The man moved with the casual grace and power of someone who knew their body well and was in complete control of it at all times. Will wondered what he'd done before becoming a doctor.

There was an artistry to him as well. Will smirked as he watched the doctor return the chart to the end of his bed with a flourish of his hand. Will wondered if it was natural or if he'd done it on purpose because he knew Will was watching. Either way it came off as pretentious but, watching the way the man carried himself, pretentiousness fit him.

He was wearing a suit, Will realized. *A suit.* To see patients in a hospital. And he hadn't even put on the white overcoat. Will's laugh was more of a garbled, choking noise.

Dr. Lecter looked up, a concerned expression on his face. Will met his gaze briefly before flicking his eyes away, surprised that he didn't get an immediate impression. He met the doctor's gaze once more. His eyes were brown. They crinkled slightly as he looked at Will, giving the appearance of warmth, but there was a cold distance in them.

And - nothing. No vaguely defined emotions, dark buried secrets, or sexual fantasies kept carefully hidden behind closed doors. Will had met a few people over the course of his life that were able to cloak their eyes to keep their secrets hidden. But usually there was still something there. A wall, a door - a residue of some sort that Will could detect. Looking into Dr. Lecter's eyes was the same as looking into a dead man's: there was simply nothing there.

Even as a small child he'd known that not having magic wouldn't make him normal, but if hadn't stopped him from wondering if he could get close without it. Several times after Jack found him he'd wished his magic away. It never worked. Apparently not even high level Mages could magick away their abilities.

Seeing nothing in the doctor's eyes was disconcerting. *Was his magic gone?* It was an irrational thought. Probably. The idea of not having magic anymore brought with it an odd feeling of incompleteness. He wondered if when people had an organ removed they felt that phantom sense of loss. There was no pain because there was nothing to feel, not really - but there was an awareness that something had been a part of him and was now gone.

I'm going to have to find another job, he thought, suppressing another laugh. He felt inappropriately giddy.

The doctor continue to look at him, his head tilted in a silent question. Will looked him straight in the eyes and said nothing.

“I’ll let Mr. Crawford know you’re awake,” Dr Lecter said, eventually. His voice still held that soothing, lilting quality. He probably got great reviews from patients for his bedside manner, if only for the calming effect of him speaking. “He’s been extremely concerned.”

Even his pivot to leave the room was done gracefully. *A dancer, maybe?*

It was only a few moments before the door reopened. Jack entered the room with his familiar brand of brisk urgency, although Will was pleased to see the relief written clearly on his face. Dr Lecter followed him but lingered in the doorway: observing, but not interfering.

“Good to see you awake, Will,” Jack said gruffly, approaching the bed.

“Good to be awake,” Will responded. His voice was still rough and he coughed harshly, but he was pleased at having spoken all the words.

Jack looked him over and Will met his eyes boldly as he did. *Concern, relief, confusion, frustration* – Jack’s eyes had always been a swirl of emotions rather than true images.

He hadn’t lost his magic after all.

Boldly, he continued to meet the other man’s eyes. There was something else there today. Something deeper. *Pain. Despair.*

“Jack – “ Will started, but Jack quickly broke eye contact and cleared his throat.

“Making eye contact now, Will?” Jack asked. His voice was amused but there was a hint of warning beneath it. Whatever had upset him, he didn’t want to talk about it. Not yet.

Will knew the feeling. He shook his head and closed his eyes. Beside him Jack sighed and circled Will’s forearm with his hand. His skin was dry but his grip was firm and solid. Will swallowed. Jack rarely touched him but when he did it was always grounding.

And usually because he was about to give Will bad news.

Reopening his eyes, Will focused on Jack’s forehead instead of his eyes. His eyes flicked quickly to the doctor, still standing in the doorway, and then back to Jack.

“Dr Lecter is consulting for us,” Jack said. Will raised his eyebrows. Jack’s shoulders raised and lowered fractionally in response – not exactly a shrug, but the hint of one. Will didn’t need more of an explanation. Dr Lecter wasn’t just consulting for the OI. He was monitoring Will.

Will had long been a subject of some *curiosity* in the upper rungs of the FBI and although they’d all been excited to “have him on the team” it had never been lost on Will that there was an element of mistrust there. Or fear, more accurately. He didn’t need to look them in the eyes to see it; he felt it in their hunched bodies or the way they veered away from him and picked up speed when passing him in the hallway.

“What did I do, Jack?” Will asked quietly. Even as he asked the question he wasn’t entirely certain he wanted to hear the answer.

Jack let out an audible sigh. "You fried all the electronics within a two mile radius, knocked down a perimeter it took five OI Mages to put up like it was nothing, neutralized all the magical energy in the house, and sent a column of light shooting miles into the sky."

"So I destroyed the crime scene and the damaged the Bureau's equipment," Will said tiredly. No wonder they wanted someone watching him. Though he was uncertain how they expected the doctor to manage him. They were terrified of what he could do. What exactly, could Dr. Lecter do, then? He cast a brief glance at the doctor. He was still and serious, listening quietly to their conversation. *The calm amidst the stormy sea.*

Jack's bitter laugh tore Will from his thoughts. "That's what it boils down to. They don't particularly care that most of us standing around outside ended up on our asses." He smiled ruefully and Will couldn't help but think that the look didn't fit his face. Jack was always gruff, strong, and in charge, even when directing people who were, at least magically speaking, much more powerful than he was. When he spoke again, his voice was unusually quiet. "What happened, Will?"

"The mirror," Will murmured. "The ornate, antique looking one."

Jack had a confused look on his face. "What mirror?"

"In the bedroom, with the body. In the corner of the room. There was a creature in it – I don't know if it was imprisoned in the mirror and the trap is failing or if it created the mirror as a trap. But it's dangerous, Jack. It almost had me."

And what would have happened if it had taken him? Will wasn't certain what the creature wanted or what it had planned for him. He only had the vague certainty that it wouldn't have been anything good. The expression on Jack's face changed from confused to concerned, his grip on Will's arm tightening.

"Will," he said softly, "there was no mirror in that room."

Their eyes met for the briefest of moments, Will's gaze defiant and Jack's eyes full of concern, before Will shifted his focus to Jack's nose and finally his chest. "It was there, Jack," he murmured. "I'm not making it up."

"I saw the room, Will. And I was reading over the notes when Dr. Lecter told me you were awake." Jack shook his head. "Everything in that room was catalogued. I would have seen it. It would be in the notes."

"I saw it," Will insisted. His voice was softer than he would have liked. "Was there anything on that wall, Jack?"

Jack looked deep in thought. "Not that I recall," he said slowly.

"What does," Will stopped to cleat his throat. He was tired and his voice was starting to fade again. He noticed movement in the doorway and Dr. Lecter was stepping toward them.

“Mr. Crawford,” Dr. Lecter said firmly, the warning clear. Jack looked away from Will to face the doctor, eyes flashing. The briefest flicker of irritation crossed the doctor’s face, so quick Will nearly missed it, before it settled back into a calmly neutral expression. The two men continued to stare at each other as Will watched them curiously. They didn’t know each other well enough for true animosity, but it was clear they were both used to being in charge. Finally, Dr. Lecter broke the stand off, stepping back slightly and adopting a casual posture. His rested one hand on the edge of Will’s bed, settling it close enough that Will could almost grip it but still just slightly out of reach, even if Will had lengthened his fingers.

“As Will’s doctor, I must insist you allow him to rest now. You may return tomorrow.”

Will could tell that Jack was tempted to use his Voice - to demand the doctor leave and he be allowed to stay. Of course that was a violation of the rules and Jack would have been escorted out - likely by one of his own OI agents - once the Command had worn off. It was an amusing image, but not one Will wanted to see brought to life. He was still holding Will’s arm, and Will moved it slightly to get the man’s attention.

“What does it mean, Jack?” he asked, returning to the earlier question. Dr. Lecter turned to look at him and Will met his eyes, unflinching. Eventually the doctor gave a nod - barely more than the slightest inclination of his head.

“A glimmer, perhaps?” Jack suggested, eyes shifting between Will and Dr. Lecter.

“Low level,” Will scoffed, only realizing he’d been holding his head up as he lowered it back to his pillow. His neck hurt and he was getting a headache. “Most of the Mages that set up the perimeter would have been able to see through it.”

“Something more powerful, then,” Jack nodded. *Much more powerful,* Will thought, knowing Jack was thinking the same thing. If Will had been the only one to see through whatever was cloaking it then it had been powerful indeed. It was possible the mirror had been in the house for years without the owner even realizing. If he’d thought about placing something on that part of the wall he would have reconsidered and left it open, without ever really knowing why.

“Is it related?” Jack asked.

Will shook his head. Jack looked at him curiously and he looked back, impassive. He was certain their unsub hadn’t seen the mirror. Particularly since he’d stolen - or, to his thinking, *borrowed* - what magic he did have. No, the mirror was a coincidence. A strange one, but entirely unrelated to the crime that had been committed. But he was far too tired to articulate anything more, so after a few brief moments he simply shook his head again, slightly more emphatically.

Jack nodded, releasing Will’s arm and patting his hand gently. “No one knows exactly what you did or how, Will,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. “But it did a number on you.”

Will was surprised when Jack squeezed his hand quickly before releasing him entirely.

“Get some sleep, son,” he said. “We need you healthy again. Bella sends her wishes for your speedy recovery as well.”

Swallowing harshly, Will nodded. Jack hadn’t called him son in years. Probably in more than a decade. He hadn’t particularly cared for it as a child, but it felt nice, now, to have someone care about him.

He watched as Jack turned and left the room, inclining his head toward Dr Lecter as he left. Once he was gone the doctor moved closer to the top of the bed, standing exactly where Jack had been. Will imagined the doctor positioning his feet to fill Jack’s footprints, overwriting the man entirely. His lips curled in the hint of a smile and he looked to the doctor, daring to meet his eyes once more.

Still nothing. It was odd - after seeing Jack he was certain he hadn’t lost his magic, but Dr. Lecter’s eyes were still vacant. Though as Will stared he thought he saw the flicker of something.

Snow. Cold. Loss.

The doctor broke the eye contact, glancing at the monitor by the bed briefly before his eyes returned to Will’s. They were once again empty. Not shuttered, not cloaked, but simply void of anything. Will wondered if he’d imagined the snow.

“What did you do to get stuck on babysitting duty, doctor?” Will asked. He would have crossed his arms if not for the IV.

There was the barest hint of amusement in Dr. Lecter’s face. “Graduated medical school, I suppose,” he said dryly.

Will didn’t want to be amused by the comment but he was anyway, barking out a laugh that was more of a cough. The doctor gave him a small but genuine smile. It made his face look rather pleasant.

“You should rest now,” he said, offering Will the water glass again. Will lifted his arm to take the glass but dropped it back to the bed almost immediately. His shoulder screamed in pain and the rest of his arm felt like lead. His fingertips were tingling. Dr. Lecter’s free hand was back on his forehead.

“Your shoulder is still healing,” the doctor said. “They weren’t certain how you received the injury, but it was pierced by something extremely sharp. There was quite a bit of damage to the muscle and tendons there, but the cut was clean. You also had a severe electrolyte imbalance that we’re still trying to control.”

An electrolyte imbalance didn’t sound all that serious to Will. “Sounds like I need some Gatorade,” he said, hearing the words break and slur together. He moved to take the straw between his lips and drank slowly.

“It’s a bit more serious than that, unfortunately.”

Will stopped drinking and closed his eyes, not believing but suddenly far too tired to argue. He heard the glass being placed back on the table. Dr. Lecter's hand was still resting on his forehead, every bit as soothing as it had been the first time, and Will felt himself drifting into sleep. He thought he felt the doctor brush the hair off his forehead.

"Get some sleep, Mr. Graham," Dr. Lecter said. His voice sounded distant, as though he was moving away – or as though Will was. *Was he traveling?* At the thought, Will forced his eyes to open. He never thought he'd be relieved to find himself still in a hospital bed.

Dr. Lecter was still standing next to the bed, face carefully impassive. He was clearly watching Will, but Will wasn't certain why or what the man was looking for. Will stared at him, fighting to keep his eyes open, as the doctor stared back. Dr. Lecter's eyes weren't exactly brown. They had a sheen of red to them – at least in the current lighting. It should have been off-putting but instead Will wanted to keep looking into those reddish-brown eyes, intrigued at what he might finally see there if he looked hard enough.

"It's Will," he said sleepily, his eyes closing. Dr. Lecter hummed a question in response. "Call me Will."

"Sleep well, Will," Dr. Lecter said. Will liked the way the doctor said his name; it was almost a purr.

If he showed me his teeth would they be sharp, like needles? Will wondered. He thought he should ask, but instead he felt himself sinking into the mattress, sliding into darkness.

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Will struggled to focus. He felt heavy. Tired. Awareness of his surroundings came slowly. When it finally did he was back at the crime scene staring into the mirror, uncertain how he'd come to stand in front of it once more.

It didn't look the way he remembered. Instead of opaque glass it was clear, and instead of his reflection he was staring at the creature. He raised his right hand, the creature raised its left. He tilted his head, the creature's head moving at the same time. He smiled, baring his teeth. The creature's lips widened and pulled back, revealing its rows of razor sharp fangs. Will bit his lip and the creature did the same, blood tricking down its chin.

Will lifted a hand to his face but his own chin was clean. In the mirror, the creature did not mimic his motion. Instead it watched him with narrowed red eyes, blood dripping from its chin down onto its stomach. The blood was red, Will noted with some surprise. The color was too human. It was wrong. The blood should have been different. Black, maybe.

"What do you want?" Will asked.

The creature's grin widened. *Beep.* It tilted its head the other way. *Beep.* It lifted a hand, and Will felt himself lifting his in response, mirroring. *Beep.*

What was beeping? Will turned from the mirror, looking for the source of the noise. He felt a hand close around his wrist, the heat of the grip burning his skin. He turned back to the

mirror, looking at the creature. It had leaned forward; its torso emerging from the pane of glass, right hand circling Will's left wrist while the other was reaching toward his face, stroking his cheek with cold talons. Will tried to pull his arm away but couldn't. Somewhere, the beeping was picking up speed.

"Will." Cold talons continued to run across his cheek, caressing. Will could hear the creature purring once more. "Will," it growled softly.

"I'm here, Will," the creature said. "You're safe."

Except that it couldn't have been the creature. The creature's mouth hadn't moved, still stretched in a toothy grin. Will looked up to the ceiling. White tiles, with flecks of brown. Fluorescent lights. It was the standard ceiling of a hospital.

He was in the hospital. Will opened his eyes as the heart monitor's rapid beeping began to slow. Someone's hand was on his forehead, cool against his clammy skin. He felt another hand circling his wrist and he jerked his arm away quickly. Both hands disappeared.

"I apologize."

Will closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. The voice was distinct. *Dr. Lecter.*

"You were thrashing in your sleep. You dislodged your monitors and I thought you might pull out your IV."

Will nodded, swallowing thickly. His mouth felt like sandpaper. "Water?" he croaked. *Shouldn't the IV be hydrating him? It wasn't working.*

There was the sound of a glass being lifted from a table and a moment later Will felt the straw. He wrapped his lips around it and drank, not bothering to open his eyes.

"Are nightmares a common occurrence for you, Mr. Graham?" Dr. Lecter asked.

"Back to formalities, are we?" Will asked. He heard the sound of the glass being replaced on the table. Opening his eyes he turned slightly to meet the doctor's gaze head on: brown eyes with a slightly reddish hue but nothing more. The doctor radiated a professional concern, but his eyes were placid.

"I wasn't certain if you were sincere in your request that I call you by your first name. You were half-asleep at the time."

"I prefer Will." He closed his eyes again. "And anyway, you didn't seem to have an issue calling me Will a few minutes ago."

"Your heart rate was elevated. I thought the familiarity might help." It was the verbal equivalent of a shrug. Will scowled to prevent the smile that was threatening to form.

"How long was I asleep?" he asked.

"Twelve hours."

Will reopened his eyes, eyebrows raised in surprise. “Twelve hours and I still feel like crap.”

“You should start feeling better soon. We’ve stabilized your electrolytes and the wound in your shoulder is healing nicely.”

“Electrolytes,” Will scoffed. Dr. Lecter placed a hand back on Will’s forehead.

“It may sound insignificant, but electrolyte imbalances can be fatal. Yours was much more serious than the need to 'drink some Gatorade,’ as you said.”

“You forgot the air quotes Dr. Lecter,” Will quipped, shifting under the doctor’s hand. He wasn’t certain if he was trying to get away from it or - something else. “Why do you keep doing that? Don’t the machines I’m hooked up to tell you everything you need to know?”

The doctor removed his hand once more. “Hannibal,” he said. Will stared at him.

“My name,” he explained. “If you wish me to call you Will, I must insist you call me Hannibal.”

“Is that appropriate?” Will asked. “A patient referring to their doctor by their first name?”

“It’s not inappropriate.” The statement was accompanied by an actual shrug. “And your status as my patient is temporary. As I understand it, once you are released we are to be colleagues.”

Will coughed. The OI expected this man to watch him. Whatever that meant their relationship was to be, exactly, Will was sure “colleagues” wasn’t an accurate description. Dr. Lecter - Hannibal - lifted the water glass again in offering but Will shook his head.

“I apologize if my touching you makes you uncomfortable, Will,” Hannibal continued, setting the glass back down. “The machines tell me everything I need to know about you physically. Touching you allows me to see how you are healing magically.”

“And how am I healing magically?” Will didn’t quite manage to hide the nervousness in his voice.

“Your magic was extremely unstable when you arrived, but has normalized.”

“Were you using magic on me?” Will asked, nervousness lost in an annoyed certainty that he already knew the answer.

Hannibal clasped his hands behind his back and looked down at Will intently, pursing his lips before answering. “Yes.”

“How powerful are you?” Will asked softly. He hadn’t felt it. He should have felt something. *Anything.*

Hannibal chuckled. “Not as powerful as you’re thinking. I perfected subtlety over the years, as it’s often difficult to perform healing magic on another Mage. We have an instinctive dislike of having magic enacted upon us.”

“That’s -,” Will looked at him, considering. The feel of magic directed at or even near him was often pleasurable, but there was a sense of foreignness to it as well; something other, something that didn’t belong. Without permission - or at least knowledge, he supposed - there was a clear sense of violation. But he’d felt none of that when the doctor touched him. He cleared his throat, watching Hannibal’s eyes. “I didn’t feel anything at all.”

“There are several reasons for that, I’m sure,” Hannibal said kindly, “none of which you should concern yourself over.”

Will’s knew his uncertainty was apparent on his face. “No?” he scoffed. “Because where I’m sitting it seems like something I should be *very* concerned about.”

“You would feel it now, were I to try again,” Hannibal said placidly, “Not because I would do anything differently, though you have only my word for that, but because you would know to be aware of it.”

Hannibal moved to the bottom of Will’s bed once more, pulling out the chart and making some notes. He replaced it with the same little flourish of his hand. Will rolled his eyes.

“You’ll be here another two or three days, I imagine,” Hannibal said. If he’d noticed the eye-roll he didn’t comment on it. “If you’re up for a visitor who isn’t your emergency contact, a Ms Katz has been requesting to see you.”

Will smiled, both in genuine excitement at the thought of seeing Beverly and because he could tell, despite the doctor’s carefully neutral tone and expression, that he was intensely curious about Will’s relationship with Jack.

Apparently Jack hadn’t given him the details.

At least, not yet. Will was certain he would get them eventually. He sighed at the thought.

He would prefer his personal history be a little more private - or sharing it a little more *at his discretion*, at least. He pushed the thoughts away in favor of focusing on how it would feel to see Beverly.

“I’m up for it.”

Hannibal nodded. He didn’t ask about Jack, and if he was frustrated that Will wasn’t volunteering an explanation he didn’t show it.

“I will contact her on your behalf,” Hannibal said, reaching for the door.

Will looked at him in surprise. “Do you normally call potential visitors, Doctor?” he asked.

“No,” Hannibal responded plainly, exiting the room without further explanation and leaving Will to stare at the door behind him.

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His bedroom was still too hot but Will was happy to wake up there. The last thing he remembered was falling asleep in the car after Jack and his father picked him up from the police station. The bedsheets were in a pile on the floor - he must have kicked them off during the night - and he wore only his underwear, but he was still sweating. He stood on his bed and opened the window to let in the breeze. It was still early, the light only beginning to creep over the horizon.

Will pulled on a pair of shorts then made his way through the hallway and downstairs to the kitchen to make something to eat. He moved quietly through the house so as not to wake his father, although it was probably unnecessary. Will was willing to bet his father had gone to sleep with a bottle of whiskey after what had happened the night before. Will probably couldn't wake him if he tried.

In the kitchen he placed two pieces of bread in the toaster. They popped up again almost immediately and Will pressed them back down. They'd bought the toaster for a dollar at a yard sale when they first moved to Biloxi. It had never worked right and bread always had to be run through at least twice to be even close to toasted. Will didn't mind, though. Not really.

He placed a filter and some grounds in their tiny coffee pot and started it brewing. His father tried to tell him he was too young for coffee, but Will put a lot of milk in it. He liked the way the bitterness of the coffee cut through the sweetness of the milk, and drinking it made him feel very adult.

He smeared his toast with butter and peach preserves and walked out front to sit on the steps of the porch. Resting his coffee cup on the step beside him and balancing a plate on his lap, Will looked out at his neighborhood. He'd never thought much about it before; it was like plenty of other neighborhoods they'd lived in. The houses were two story, taller than they were wide, wood siding and shingles. Most of them were the dingy white of old, peeling paint. A few of the houses were different colors: a buttercream yellow, two different shades of blue, and the rather memorable pink color of the house at the end of the street where Ms. Smith lived.

Will liked Ms. Smith's house. She planted red and yellow rose bushes in her yard and had two Siamese cats named George and Harry. They would sit in the window and stare at Will when he walked by, tails twitching behind them. Once he'd put his hand up to the window and the bigger one – George – had lifted a paw to meet Will's hand before both cats turned and ran back into the house where Will couldn't see them.

Ms. Smith like to bake, and if she saw Will she would give him things she'd made: slices of apple pie, a bag of peanut butter cookies, peach muffins, zucchini bread. Like most adults she told Will he was "too skinny" as she passed him treats.

He knew that most of his neighbors were aware his father liked whiskey even if they were too polite to mention it. He also knew they suspected he wasn't fed well, which made him upset because it wasn't true. It was true they didn't eat the most expensive food and it was also true Will's father rarely cooked, leaving Will to his own devices when it came to preparing meals. But there was always food to be had.

Will would fill out later in life, though his build would always be slender, but as a child he was thin-limbed and knobby-kneed and not generally taken seriously. He'd once overheard a neighbor say he believed he ate enough because he "didn't know better" - as if Will couldn't tell whether or not he went to bed hungry.

He always felt a little guilty taking the food he was given because he knew his father wouldn't like it. He didn't want Will accepting "charity" they didn't need. But Will liked sweets and his father never bought them and certainly never baked - and Will couldn't remember any of the recipes he and his Aunt used to make to bake them on his own. If he could even have talked his father into buying the ingredients.

He wasn't about to turn down Ms. Smith's cookies or zucchini bread. He took what she gave him, said a polite "thank you" and made sure to eat everything before his father saw it.

He would miss her when he had to go away.

As he ate his toast and drank his coffee, he heard the screen door open and snap shut behind him. His father seated himself on the edge of the porch, his own cup of coffee in hand. His father drank coffee black. Without the milk to cool it the liquid was still steaming and he blew across it before taking a sip. Will watched him from the corner of his eye. He was up early and he looked different. More awake than usual.

Will took another bite of toast and then wished he hadn't. His stomach hurt.

"We need to talk, Billy," his father said.

"Will," Will said angrily. He really, *really* didn't want to talk.

"Will," his father said softly in response. Will looked up sharply, feeling his mouth fall open in surprise. He closed it quickly, meeting his father's eyes for the briefest of moments before focusing on his chin.

His father's eyes were the hardest to look at. He'd seen the image in them long before he started seeing feelings and secrets in other people's eyes. Most eyes changed if he looked more than once, but his father's never did.

Every time he looked in his father's eyes he saw his mother.

Her hair was lighter than his, her face softer, her eyes rounder. He had her mouth, though, and his hair was curly like hers even if he had his father's coloring. Her eyes were a blue-grey; the reflection of clouds on water on an overcast day. She was standing by the water barefoot in a light blue sundress and white button down sweater, smiling but somehow sad at the same time, the wind blowing her hair gently away from her face. His father must have had pictures at some point, but he either hadn't kept them or they were well-hidden. The image in his father's eyes was the only one Will had of her.

He craved and avoided it in equal measure.

“I don’t want them to take me away, Daddy,” Will said softly, eyes dropping from his father’s chin to the plate in his lap.

“Billy - Will,” his father said, sighing heavily. He reached out to place a rough, calloused hand on his son’s shoulder. Will felt the weight of it pressing into him before his father pulled it away, not allowing the touch to linger. “No one’s taking you away, son.”

Relief swept through Will. His father wasn’t going to give him up. “They’re not coming back to get me?”

His relief was short-lived.

“They are,” his father sighed. “Or rather, we’re going to them. We leave for New Orleans at the end of the week.”

Will focused on the plate in his lap, collecting crumbs leftover from the toast on the tip of his pointer finger, tracing around the half-eaten piece still resting on the plate. “I don’t want to go,” he said softly.

His father sighed once more. “You vanished from your room last night Billy. You disappeared into thin air and then not thirty minutes later a police station from a town more than three hours away called to tell me you were there.” Will didn’t look up, but he could sense his father shaking his head. “Do you even know how you did it?”

“No,” Will whispered, chasing the crumbs around his plate. “I thought you were going to let Jack take me away. I was scared and I didn’t want to be here anymore. I imagined being at the lake we used to go to, and then - ” He shrugged.

“Billy - ”

“Will.”

“Your mother wanted you to be a Will.” His father took a long drink from his coffee, swallowing audibly. “She never wanted you to be a Bill or a Billy.”

Will looked up at him then; sadness clear in his father’s face and posture. He never talked about Will’s mother. She was a topic they had both carefully avoided for as long as Will could remember. He knew his father loved her, he knew she was gone, and he knew it hurt his father to think about her so he never asked for details.

His father brushed a strand of Will’s too long hair off his face, tucking it behind his ear. “Your mother was a force of nature. You are too. Your magic must come from her family, because it doesn’t come from mine. You are every bit your mother’s son. ‘Will’ suits you.” His father coughed and looked away. “There’s a school there. They specialize in teaching people with magic. No one’s taking you away son, but you need people who can help you.”

“You hate people helping us,” Will said stubbornly. His father’s chuckle was a rough sound, but still warm and pleasing. Will rarely heard his father laugh.

“Sometimes even an old fool like your Daddy has to face facts.” He took another long drink of coffee, staring distractedly off in the distance. “Forget waiting, Will,” he said eventually. “Go pack. We’ll go to Mobile first, spend a few days there, and then we’ll head to New Orleans.”

“Mobile’s the wrong way,” Will said.

“I got a friend there who’ll put us up for a few days. We should do something nice together before we go to New Orleans, don’t you think?”

Will nodded, ignoring a vague sense of discomfort. He hadn’t really been Listening - he didn’t Listen to his father the way he did other adults - but he could tell there was something else behind the words. Something he didn’t like.

“You like Mobile,” his father said, watching him. It wasn’t phrased as a question, but Will nodded in answer anyway. They’d been in Mobile for nearly a whole year before going East to Pensacola, then heading back West to Gulf Shores, Pascagoula and finally Biloxi. Despite the rain, Mobile was his favorite city. Will couldn’t explain why, exactly, but it *felt* different from anywhere else they’d been.

The whole city had been decorated in purple, green, and gold when they’d moved, right before Carnival. Soon after they’d settled in there were parades and people dancing in the streets. Will had never seen anything like it. Everyone had been so happy and even though the noise, bustle and throngs of people and emotion were all a bit overwhelming he’d felt that happiness in his whole being. It felt light, like he was floating.

His father was still watching him, so Will stood, brushing crumbs off his shorts with one hand and holding his dirty plate in the other. He bent down to pick up his coffee cup.

“Anyone told you that coffee’s gonna stunt your growth?” his father asked.

Will smiled. “You did, Daddy.”

“The boy don’t listen,” his father said, voice full of fondness, as he headed back into the house. Will followed, unhurried. It wouldn’t take long for them to pack. They stuck to necessities, both because that was what they could afford and by design. Will wondered if he would have time to say goodbye to Ms. Smith before they left. She might give him some zucchini bread for the road if he did.

***

When the door to his hospital room opened again Will was prepared for another check-up from Doctor Lecter - Hannibal - or even another visit from Jack. He was pleasantly surprised when Beverly entered the room instead. She lingered for a moment in the doorway, tapping her fingers nervously against her leg and shaking her right foot. Her shoulders were drawn and hunched, her dark eyes full of concern. She looked tired. This was not the Beverly he knew at all.

His Beverly had an aura of amused calm about her.

This Beverly was a study in anxiety.

Will wanted to ask if she was ok, but as she looked him over from across the room she visibly relaxed: her movements stilled, her shoulders dropped and she gave him a small, tentative smile. He grinned broadly in response.

“Hey Beverly,” he said, grateful his voice sounded stronger than it had the day before. “It’s good to see you.”

“Graham,” she said moving to stand by his bed. He pushed himself up, watching as her eyes drifted to the needle in his hand.

“They should be able to take it out soon,” he said, shrugging and then wishing he hadn’t. He tried not to react to the pain but Beverly must have seen it on his face.

“I’ve never understood why you can’t heal yourselves,” she said quietly. “Or why someone else can’t.”

“We can, but it’s,” he paused, swallowing, thinking about his few attempts at healing. “It can be tricky, depending on the type of healing.”

Beverly nodded, gripping his hand tightly. He looked at her in surprise. “It’s really good to see you, Will. I was afraid. I - ” she trailed off and Will squeezed her hand in return.

“I’m sorry I scared you,” he said. “But it’s fine. I’m going to be fine.”

“You didn’t scare me,” she said, angrily. “You absolutely *terrified* me. I was the first one in. I was the one who did CPR.”

CPR? He looked at her, confused.

“Jack didn’t even tell you, did he?” she asked, moving from anger to more of an irritated exasperation.

“He said it did a number on me,” Will said thoughtfully, remembering the feeling of loneliness as the world went black before him. He shuddered, causing Beverly to tighten her grip even more. She was clutching him so tightly it bordered on painful, but he didn’t ask her to let go or try to remove his hand.

“You didn’t have a heartbeat. It was at least two minutes before we got it back.” She met his eyes and though he flinched he didn’t look away, knowing it was important to her.

He saw himself. He was limp, his skin was pale and there was a substantial amount of blood pooling under him. His shirt was torn where the creature had pierced him. He saw her screaming, rolling him over. He saw his own glassy eyes, clouded in death. He saw her burying him; a casket lowered slowly into the ground, people standing on the edges waiting to dump a handful of dirt or a flower into the grave.

He closed his eyes as Beverly’s feelings washed over him. She’d been certain he was gone and there was an enormous sense of grief and loss and beyond that – love. He reopened his

eyes, fixing them on her nose instead of her eyes.

“A lot more people would be at my funeral in your vision of it than in reality,” he joked.

“Don’t deflect, Graham,” she said sternly. Then, softening, “I thought you were gone. I was devastated.”

“I didn’t know you felt that strongly about me,” Will murmured. “It’s nice to know someone does.”

“You’re like a brother to me, Will. You were so young when you started and I’ve watched you grow into yourself.”

They were silent, watching each other. He risked another, brief glimpse at her eyes - they were wide and worried. She appeared to be on the verge of tears. He swallowed thickly, feeling her intense fear and equally intense relief wash over him once more. His chest ached. He had no idea what to say to her. She seemed to recognize that and sighed, squeezing his hand softly.

“I’m just - I’m really glad you’re ok. OK?” The emotion in her voice was overwhelming.

“Is this the part where we kiss?” he asked, his awkward attempt at diffusing the tension falling flat. She narrowed her eyes momentarily before catching the joke and rolling them.

“Gross,” she said. “I said you’re like a brother. I wouldn’t kiss my brother.”

“Not even on the cheek?”

She punched him playfully in the arm. He winced and Beverly’s eyes widened. “Shit, sorry!”

Will laughed. “Worth it to see you smile, Katz.”

She gave him a considering look. “You do get more handsome as you get older, you know. I mean, if I were thinking about that sort of thing.” Will flushed and she laughed gleefully. “Now, embarrassing a brother - I can definitely see myself doing that.”

***

Mobile was as nice, and as wet, as Will remembered. His father’s friend Cyril, who went by Cy, was an older Creole gentleman. He greeted Will warmly wrapping his large, dry hands around Will’s smaller one and telling him how much he’d grown.

Will only vaguely remembered him, having caught glimpses from the window of their tiny house when Cy came to pick up his father for work - and when he dropped him off after a night out at the bar. Will’s father didn’t typically go out drinking, preferring instead to drink at home. *More bang for your buck, eh Billy?* he’d say. But when he’d been working with Cy they would go out a few times a week.

Those nights Will locked the doors and windows and made hot dogs, dirty rice or the TV dinners they found for 88 cents a piece at the store. One of them - Will’s favorite - was mac

and cheese with mashed potatoes formed into a smiley face. His father tried to make sure there were always a few in the freezer. He would take his food and a book into his room and tuck himself under the covers to read. Usually he fell asleep before his father came home, waking to the sound of Cy's truck in the front yard and peering out the window to see his father stumbling to the front door.

Their first day back in Mobile they went to an oyster house. Will and his father never ate out and Will wondered how they were going to pay, but his father told him to order anything he wanted so Will got a dozen oysters on the half shell, fried pickles and fried green tomatoes.

"Plan on sharing any of that, boy?" Cy asked. Will looked down at his lap, unsure if he was teasing or not, and unsure what to say either way.

"Leave 'em be, Cy," his father said. "Boy can eat what he wants. It's a treat - right, son?"

Will nodded, chewing on his lower lip.

Cy raised his hands in mock surrender. "I'm jus' teasing," he said, eyes bright with laughter. "You need some meat on them bones."

Will sat politely, listening to his father and Cy talk about boat motors, whiskey, and women without really following the conversation. Will's father had taught him a little bit about motors and Will was decent at fixing them despite being young. He could care less about the whiskey and the women.

Finally the food arrived. Will squeezed a singled wedge of lemon over the plate and picked up his first oyster. He agitated it with the oyster fork to loosen it and tipped it into his mouth, chewing the plump meat a few times before swallowing, enjoying the salty taste of the oyster meat with the hint of citrus followed by the briny flavor of the liquid in the shell. He flipped the shell as he set it down on the plate and picked up a second before he noticed Cy was watching him.

"You know how to eat your oysters, don't you boy?" Cy said. His smile wrinkled his face, creating lines around his eyes that Will hadn't noticed before. He looked both older and kinder when he smiled.

Will nodded, tipping the second oyster back and licking his lips. He speared a fried green tomato with his fork. He hadn't eaten them since they'd left Mobile and he'd forgotten how good they were. Cy and his father chatted while they ate. Will knew they wanted to talk about him, but they weren't going to while he was there so he excused himself to the bathroom once he'd finished his food.

He tried to to listen in on their conversation the way he had with his father and Jack, but the restaurant was too noisy. He made his way slowly back to them, trying to stay unseen, eventually stopping a short distance from the table. They weren't looking at him. No one was. He held his breath, trying to be as still as possible.

"That where you got the money?" Cy asked. "This Jack fellow?"

Will's father inclined his head. "He gave me some to move us. At least I can give the boy a few nice days with it."

"You know they're gonna take 'em." Cy sipped his beer, turning the bottle and scowling at its near-empty state. "They'll study 'em."

"They ain't gonna take him." Will's father's eyes flashed. "They ain't. I won't let them."

Cy sighed. "May not be yer choice."

"Mr. Crawford swore it to me." Will's father turned and looked at Will, who sucked in a breath. His father would know he'd been listening. But instead of saying anything or even acknowledging that Will was there, his father seemed to look *through* him. His father raised two fingers and rubbed the space between his eyes like he had a headache, but he still didn't acknowledge Will standing directly in front of him.

Will lifted a hand and stared at it. It looked normal.

"I need a smoke," Cy said. He pulled his wallet from his back pocket and placed some bills on the table before pushing his chair back and standing. "Meet ya outside."

Once Cy was gone, Will approached the table slowly. "Daddy," he said, as he pulled out his chair to sit back down. Will's father started.

"Sneaking up on a guy, there, Billy?" he asked nervously, signaling to the waitress. "How long you been there?"

"Just got back. Thanks for lunch, Daddy." Will spoke softly, deciding not to correct his name.

His father leaned back in his chair. "You get enough to eat?"

Will nodded. He pulled at the edge of a napkin, tearing a piece from the side. Somehow he had made it so his father couldn't see him. He wondered if he could put the napkin back together too. He stared at the napkin, willing it to mend itself. It remained stubbornly in two pieces.

"Where's Cy?" he asked, even though he knew the answer.

"Smoking."

HIs father seemed to relax at the question, taking it as confirmation Will hadn't overheard anything. Will didn't respond but continued to tear at his napkin, making a small pile of the shredded pieces and forming it into a nest as they waited for their server to come back with the check.

Will added one of the oyster shells to his nest made of napkin. The brown color reminded him a bit of the brown speckle of a wren egg.

He preferred not to be around the other kids during recess, so instead of playing soccer or dodgeball he'd taken to wandering to the edge of the field and climbing the ash trees. One

day he found a nest of small blue eggs - robin eggs, though he hadn't known that at the time - perched between two branches. Curious about the creature that laid eggs in such a bright color, he'd spent hours in the library studying field guides to birds. He'd looked at several before he found one that included pictures of bird eggs and not only the birds themselves. Most birds laid different looking eggs, so you could tell what was going to hatch by looking at the colors.

Their server placed the bill on the table with a smile, pulling Will from his thoughts. His father took Cy's money and added some of his own before pushing his chair back and standing.

"Come on, son. Cy and I were talking about going to see the Battleships. You always did like that."

Will nodded again, brushing his hair behind his ears and standing to follow his father. He didn't look behind him or he would have seen the curious expression on the bus boy's face as he moved to their table.

Next to Will's plate was a small nest of twigs containing a single, speckled brown egg.

***

It was dark.

It was dark and Will was cold.

Distantly he could hear water dripping. He imagined it rolling down a stalactite, the drop held in place at the end of the formation until it grew so large that the water's surface tension could no longer fight gravity and it fell, hitting the pool below with a soft plunk that echoed through the caves.

As his eyes adjusted to the dim light Will realized he was, in fact, underground. He reached a hand out and hit rock wall quickly, smooth and cool to the touch. Reaching his other hand he felt nothing: the cavern was wider that the span of his arms. He reached up and felt nothing. He didn't think the opening in the ground was too large, even if the ceiling was higher than he could reach.

He thought about conjuring a light but something stopped him. It was nothing he could pinpoint beyond a feeling that he *shouldn't;* that the darkness was not meant to be expelled.

Keeping one hand on the wall to his right and one above his head - just in case - he began to move slowly toward the sounds of the water. The steadiness of the drips was soothing in an odd way; the pattern lulling him into a feeling of calm.

He was so focused on it he didn't notice the footsteps.

They were quiet, at first, moving in time with his - a sound easily put aside as an odd echo or a figment of his imagination.

It was easy to imagine things lurking in the dark, after all.

But even as he became aware of it he felt no fear. He began to pause more frequently, shifting his awareness between the steady dripping of the water growing ever closer and the soft padding sound behind him that was keeping a steady distance. Several times after stopping he heard rustling behind him continue for the briefest of moments before stilling, waiting for him to move again before it followed.

Logically he should have been afraid. He was being followed by something unknown in the dark of an underground cave, the size and shape of which he had no knowledge.

He had no knowledge of how he'd arrived in the cave either. He had simply accepted that he was there and begun walking blindly in the dark toward the sound of water. He shifted on his feet, waiting for his mind and body to connect to his situation and panic to set in. It did not. He felt entirely calm.

He closed his eyes - an odd thing to do in the dark, perhaps, but deliberately taking away any attempt at vision allowed him to focus on his other senses. He felt it, then, a tingling sensation on his skin. It was less intrusive than it should have been. Subtle.

He could shake it off now that he knew it was there, but he didn't. Keeping his eyes closed he focused once more on the sound of water. As he moved forward the hand above his head hit rock.

If the tunnel got too low he would have to stop. He would have to turn and confront whatever was behind him. He felt the first prickle of fear, then, the feeling slicing through the false sense of calm as his heart rate increased. He continued moving forward, the ceiling lowering until he had to duck. Behind him he heard the sound of antlers scraping on rock.

Sucking in a breathe he stopped. Turned. His eyes were still closed and he kept them that way, certain if he opened them he would be confronted with the sight of two red, glowing orbs.

Lonely.

He hadn't spoken and neither had whatever was following him, but he still felt the weight of the word reverberating throughout the rock. The calm was gone, the rock beneath his fingertips slimy. He was having trouble breathing, inhaling sharply but not getting enough oxygen.

Lonely.

Will fell to his knees, hitting the rock hard, the jolt of it rushing up his spine as his teeth clacked together sharply. He shuddered. *Light,* he thought, *light.* He moved his hands to conjure a ball as his eyes snapped open -

- taking in concerned maroon eyes hovering above him.

He was still in the hospital. He laughed, harshly. He'd been dreaming again. It had felt utterly real. He realized with some embarrassment that his cheeks were wet and moved to wipe at

them, but Dr. Lecter - Hannibal - was already moving a washcloth across his face. He grumbled, shifting in the bed.

“You don’t need to clean my face,” he said, clenching his jaw in anger. “I’m not some fucking child.”

A ghost of some undefinable emotion drifted across the doctor’s face. It happened so quickly Will almost didn’t notice the change - wondered, in fact, if he had really seen it before deciding that he had. The doctor’s expression as he looked down at Will, washcloth still in his now unmoving hand, betrayed nothing.

“No,” Hannibal said calmly. “You are not a child and I imagine you haven’t needed - or indeed, wanted - care in quite some time.” He wiped Will’s cheek with the cloth once more before pulling away; though whether he did it to irritate Will further or to prove some elusive point Will wasn’t entirely sure.

He glared at the doctor, irritated by his weakness, irritated by the doctor’s kindness (or whatever it was), irritated by his own reaction to it, but irritated most of all by his sudden urge to apologize for being upset. He said nothing, meeting the doctor’s eyes boldly and daring him to speak.

Is it truly bold of you when you know there is nothing to fear in them? He shook his head at the thought and Hannibal’s face shifted nearly imperceptibly, but from the slight crinkling around his eyes Will could tell he was amused.

“Care to tell me what you were dreaming about?” Hannibal asked, his face shifting back to an expression of concern.

“No,” Will looked away, fighting the urge to cross his arms, his lips curling in distaste as he realized he was acting rather like a petulant child despite having just shouted at his doctor that he was *not a fucking child.* He sighed.

“You were speaking in your sleep,” Hannibal continued calmly, “though the only word I made out was ‘lonely’. Do you feel alone, Will?”

Don’t we all? Will refused to look at him. He liked to be alone. It was better. Easier. Beside him Hannibal was silent, waiting. Will huffed a noise.

“Kind of a personal question, don’t you think, *Doctor?*”

Hannibal said nothing, and Will could feel him silently watching - a model of patience. Will hated that he felt the need to answer. To explain himself. He shouldn’t - didn’t - need to share anything with this man.

“Not my loneliness,” he said, emotion clouding his voice. He cleared his throat and turned his head back to look at Hannibal. “Not me. The creature.”

Hannibal still said nothing but tilted his head the slightest bit in encouragement.

“His magic is old. Primal. Lustful.” He flushed, remembering the arousal he’d experienced as he’d been pulled toward the mirror and feeling a rush of heat travel through him. “It feels,” he paused, searching Hannibal’s face for how best to describe it. “Deep,” he said, finally.

Hannibal nodded. “Old magic. It connects with what some might argue are our baser emotions; lust certainly being one of them.”

Will flushed in earnest then, squirming under the weight of Hannibal’s eyes on him. He cleared his throat again. “And loneliness?”

“Seeking the acceptance and understanding of others is a common theme in our history and literature. Man is not meant to be alone.”

“Some of us are, though, aren’t we.” Will regretted speaking almost immediately. It was the kind of statement that generally earned him a look of pity he didn’t particularly want, but Hannibal’s expression remained curious.

“Yes,” Hannibal said, quietly. “You’ve suffered quite a bit of loss in your life, haven’t you Will?”

“Yeah, well, most of that wasn’t my fault,” Will quipped.

Hannibal continued to look at him curiously, but Will looked away. He had no intention of continuing the conversation.

“Get some rest, Will,” Hannibal said quietly, exiting the room so quietly Will almost didn’t hear him go.

***

Battleship Memorial Park might have been named for the battleships, but it housed several different war machines. Will liked the planes best. The P-51 Mustang was his favorite.

One of the few times another kid had invited him over they’d watched old Snoopy cartoons. Cassie had been a classmate when they’d been living in Mobile before. She seemed nice, but Will could tell she didn’t really want to invite him over. Cassie’s mother and Will’s father had run into each other in the hallway dropping their kids off for class, and she’d commented on what a “sweet, serious boy” Will was and suddenly he was being invited over for the afternoon. Cassie gave him a chocolate cereal he didn’t like as a snack, turned on the TV, and then hardly spoke to him the rest of the afternoon.

That suited Will just fine. He ate the cereal to be polite, washing his bowl when he was done. He and his father rarely had a TV, and even when they did they almost never turned it on. Will usually preferred to read but he watched Snoopy with rapt attention that afternoon, imagining himself fighting the Red Baron.

The P-51 wasn’t the same plane, but every time Will saw it he was reminded of the cartoons. He took his time looking around while his father and Cy walked together. Periodically Cy would pull a flask out of his pocket. Will watched his father waive it off the first several

times the other man offered, but he eventually accepted it and took a sip. Will closed his eyes and thought about flying. For a moment he felt weightless, like he could float away.

“Billy?” his father called. Will scowled and opened his eyes, looking down. He was still standing firmly on the ground. “We’re leaving Billy. Will.”

Cy gave him a curious look as they headed back to the car, the wetness in the air that had accompanied them throughout the day turning to an actual drizzle as they did. Will climbed int he backseat, his father slipping into the passenger seat and Cy taking the wheel.

Cy lived in the second story apartment of a home just outside of the downtown area. It was small, but he had a spare room that Will and his father could share. The bed was tiny, so Will took one of their ridge rests and a sleeping bag and set himself up on the floor. His father offered him the bed, but Will shook his head. He was glad the bed was small. Had it been larger his father might have suggested they share and Will strongly preferred having his own space - even if that space was on the floor.

It was only mid afternoon, so Will settled down with his book. He was rereading *Gulliver’s Travels,* one of the few books he owned. The library in Biloxi had been selling damaged books for 25 cents each. Will rarely had pocket change but had found a dollar in the park earlier that day. Thinking it seemed like fate he’d purchased four books that, despite their damage, had the texts completely intact: *Gulliver’s Travels, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, As I Lay Dying* and *Brave New World*. His father told him the books were too old for him - and Will had to admit there were parts of them he didn’t understand - but it felt nice to own them.

Gulliver’s Travels was missing the back cover completely and about half of the front cover. Will would curl the pages around the back while he read it. He’d only made it through a few pages before he was distracted by voices in the other room. He moved to the door and pressed up against the wood to listen.

“He’s dangerous,” Cy said.

“He’s a child, Cy,” Will’s father argued.

“He was floating, *zanmi m*. You saw.” Cy’s voice was hard. Will didn’t like it. He closed his eyes but opened them quickly. He didn’t want to think himself away again. If he traveled, he wanted it to be in the car with his father.

“Yeah, I saw.” His father sounded defeated. “You want us out?”

Will felt the silence between them as a physical thing, as though the house was sinking under its weight. Then he heard a soft smack; the sound of Cy’s hand landing on his father’s back.

“Let’s get a drink, Beau,” Cy said.

They called out a terse goodbye, Cy adding that there was food in the fridge, and Will heard the front door closing and locking behind them, leaving him alone in the blissful silence.

***

He was aware of a presence nearby before he was fully awake. Though whoever was there was silent, there was a weight to them that filled the room. Beneath that there was a buzzing; a staticky hum that quickly faded to the background.

Magic.

Hannibal his brain supplied, and he was pleased to find he was right when he opened his eyes. It was the first time he'd felt the other man's magic but there was something familiar about it.

"What're you doing?" he asked groggily. He wondered how long he'd been out this time. Had he woken to Hannibal in his room earlier that morning? Or had that been the day before?

"No more bad dreams?" Hannibal asked, his voice gentle.

Will shook his head but said nothing.

"It's lunchtime," the doctor said, which Will supposed was an answer to his earlier question. He waited patiently for further explanation but Hannibal was quiet. Instead, he reached into a bag and pulled out a glass container, setting it on the rolling table along with a napkin and spoon before moving the table so that it rested over Will's bed.

Hannibal opened the container and Will stared at the dish in front of him. It was a soup, but a hearty one. There was some kind of meat - beef, he thought - and vegetables. It smelled incredible and his stomach growled.

"This isn't hospital food," he said, staring at the meal. "Why did you bring this to me?"

"I enjoy cooking," Hannibal said.

Will watched as Hannibal pulled out another glass container and spoon, seating himself in the chair next to Will's bed and positioning the container on his lap.

He was wearing the white coat today, but beneath it was another pretentious three piece suit. It suddenly occurred to Will that he hadn't paid any attention to what Hannibal had been wearing last time he woke or he would have known if it was the same day.

Maybe it didn't matter. He'd spent a week completely out of it, after all. What difference did a few more confusing days make?

Will pushed the table toward the other man. "Why don't we share this," he said.

"Very kind of you," Hannibal responded, as though they were friends and he had not just brought a man he barely knew a homemade meal while he was in the hospital. Will watched him, trying not to feel awkward. His stomach growled again and he picked up his spoon, taking a large bite.

It took everything he had not to moan in appreciation and wolf down the rest of the meal. He still ate faster than was probably polite and only barely resisted the urge to lick the dish. When he looked up from his food Hannibal was smiling.

“Thanks,” he said belatedly, feeling slightly embarrassed at Hannibal’s attention. “It was really good.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

He shifted in the bed, realizing there was no longer an IV in his arm. He hadn’t even noticed when it was removed. “Why?” he asked again, searching Hannibal’s face.

The doctor smiled like the Mona Lisa: barely there, cryptic, plenty to hide. It made Will want to pull the man’s lips apart to check his teeth. *Don’t be ridiculous,* he told himself.

“Hospital food is barely palatable,” Hannibal said. “It has a minimum amount of nutritional value but provides no enjoyment. This, on the other hand,” he gestured to his nearly empty and Will’s fully empty dishes “has a higher nutritional value with much better flavor.”

Will fought the urge to smile. *Pretentious bastard.* “I don’t know, hospital food isn’t that bad.”

Any change in the doctor’s face was minute, but Will still had the distinct impression he was oscillating between irritation and amusement before finally deciding on the latter.

“That doesn’t explain why you brought it to me,” Will said, pushing. Hannibal met his eyes. He instinctively looked away, his earlier boldness gone, before remembering there had been nothing to see and looking back. They were as quiet and placid as ever.

“If we’re to be colleagues,” Hannibal spoke slowly, “we should get to know each other, don’t you think?”

Will huffed. “You were hired to monitor me, Doctor Lecter.”

Hannibal said nothing, merely watched Will with that familiar, suddenly extremely irritating calm. Will crossed his arms, feeling the twinge in his shoulder at the movement. It wasn’t as bad as it should have been, and the surprise must have shown in his face.

“My specialty is healing magic,” Hannibal explained, “though I assume you don’t need to be told.”

Will nodded in response. It made sense - it hadn’t always been the case but recently a number of Mages that specialized in healing were also licensed MDs. Hannibal was older though. He preceded that trend.

He’s not old, Graham, he chastised himself, though the voice was somehow Beverly’s. The doctor was older than Will - probably by a good ten years or so based on the light silvering of his hair. But definitely not old. Distinguished. He was aging well and clearly took care of himself, if his muscular figure and natural grace were anything to go by. Hannibal was

watching him and Will found himself fighting a flush at having called him *old* - even if he hadn't, really, and even if it had only been in his head.

Hannibal's lips turned upward into that same barely there smile and and Will frowned in response.

"So you healed my shoulder," Will said, remembering cool fingers on his forehead and the soft touch of a warm washcloth across his cheeks.

"Sped it along," Hannibal corrected, before echoing Will's words to Beverly. "The complete healing of an injury is tricky; the body often rebels against the magic. Better to give it the tools to heal on its own but at an accelerated rate."

"I'm sure you're better at it than I am," Will said, truthfully.

"I imagine you have many talents of your own," Hannibal gave him a much broader smile, though Will wasn't entirely certain it was sincere.

"I see my reputation has proceeded me," Will sighed. Hannibal laughed in response, his smile shifting to one of utter sincerity.

"It did, I admit," the doctor said, "but a reputation is created by those around you. I do not wish know more about your reputation. I wish to know more about you."

Will stared at him, still enjoying the novelty of the eye contact. He watched as the other man blinked under his scrutiny, and when he reopened his eyes Will memorized the flecks of gold that appeared in them. There was no reason for this man to be interested in him for any reason other than the usual. He had been - still was, he supposed - the youngest person ever recruited to the OI. He also had the highest solve rate for magical crimes, but the fact that Will was actually good at his job tended to be forgotten in the excitement of his youth and power.

Not that he was young any longer.

Will swallowed and looked away. "Yes, I'm quite the oddity," he mumbled.

Hannibal made a noncommittal noise, reaching over to collect Will's empty dish and add it to his own. He placed them both back into the bag he'd brought before pulling out a small white box. He opened it and angled it toward Will.

"Praline?"

"Would you be offended if I told you I'm not a fan of pecans?" Will asked.

"No," Hannibal said, though he didn't pull the box away. "I would note it as the first of your preferences that I had the pleasure of learning."

Will felt his lips attempting to curl into a smile and he frowned instead, rolling his eyes and reaching for a praline.

“I don’t hate pecans,” Will said. “Though it you’re going to the trouble of getting southern treats, I prefer bourbon balls. Or potato candy.”

Hannibal seemed genuinely pleased. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Will wondered idly where Hannibal had found the pralines. He didn’t see them often in shops in Virginia, and they were delicious: just the right texture and sweetness. Hannibal hadn’t taken one and instead was watching Will with a peculiar intensity that wasn’t making him nearly as uncomfortable as it should have. In fact, he rather liked being the focus of Hannibal’s attention.

Not that he was going to let the doctor know that. *Not that he entirely understood it himself.*

Will finished his praline and Hannibal held the box out to him again. “I doubt these have the same nutritional value your soup had, Doctor.”

Hannibal grinned. It was the first time Will had seen his teeth. His incisors were slightly sharper than typical but his teeth were otherwise normal. Will wondered what it would feel like to run his tongue across those teeth, surprising himself at the thought. He shifted, trying to get comfortable against the stiff hospital pillows at his back.

“You only have one more night here,” Hannibal said, his face once again neutral. “Jack has asked that we release you to him.”

Will snorted, watching the edges of Hannibal’s mouth twitch in response. He laid back against the pillow, wrestling against it to create a space for himself. “Don’t you have the final say in that? Or me?”

“Would you prefer to stay here?” Hannibal asked. Will studied his face once more. It was a genuine offer - Hannibal had likely okayed his release to Jack’s care but was willing to reverse his decision to keep Will in the hospital. If Will asked.

“No.” Will shook his head emphatically. “I want to go home.” His tiny apartment with its sparse furniture, perpetually poorly stocked cupboards, cheap but reliable coffee pot and small but comfortable twin bed suddenly felt like a sanctuary and he wanted nothing more than to be there.

“Then you shall,” Hannibal said softly. “But I was sincere in my desire to get to know a colleague, Will. Perhaps you’ll join me for dinner tomorrow night.”

“I - uh,” Will coughed.

Hannibal handed him a business card with a handwritten address on the back. “My address.”

Will nodded, setting it on the table.

Hannibal picked up his bag and headed for the door, turning to face Will before leaving. “I won’t be here when you’re released tomorrow morning. But I’ll expect you for dinner at 8pm sharp. Don’t be late.”

***

He was almost done with *Gulliver's Travels* when his father and Cy returned, though the quiet hadn't lasted nearly long enough. His father stumbled into their room, grunting heavily at Will before falling face first into the bed. He was asleep immediately. Moments later, Will heard the door to Cy's bedroom open and close, the apartment falling quiet once more.

Will stood, walking around the bed to stare at his father's unconscious form. His cheeks were redder than usual from the alcohol, his face slack in sleep, a small amount of drool pooling at the corner of his mouth. He snorted, his breath catching and stopping briefly as he shifted on the bed. He coughed, suddenly and harshly, before falling back into sleep once more.

He would have a headache in the morning.

After opening several cabinets in the kitchen in search of cups, Will finally found some coffee mugs. He took two, filling them both with water from the sink. One he would leave on the bedside table for his father but the other he drank, taking longs sips of the cool liquid before refilling it.

He was about to head back to the spare room when movement in the living room caught his attention. Cy was sitting on the couch, watching him with intense eyes. Will sucked in a breath, setting the mugs on the kitchen counter.

"I was just getting water," he said.

Cy said nothing, standing and walking silently toward Will, who stood frozen in front of the sink.

"You have a great deal of power, boy," Cy said. The intensity of his voice matched his eyes. There was something menacing there that Will didn't like. He could feel his heart pounding.

"I don't, sir," he said.

"You do," Cy said quietly, his large hand circling one of Will's wrists and squeezing. "More power than I have seen in a long, long time."

"You're hurting me," Will said, hating how his voice shook.

"Am I?" Cy's voice was dark. Dangerous. He tried to pull away, but Cy tightened his grip. Will could feel the man's eyes boring into him, drawing his own up, but he looked steadfastly at the floor, terrified at what he might see if he looked. He squirmed in Cy's grip, but the man was much stronger than he looked. Will felt tears begin to form behind his eyes and he squeezed them shut.

He thought of the church he'd liked to visit last time they were in Mobile. The stained glass windows had been specially made in Germany and brought over to line its walls. Will had spent hours sitting in the pews watching the sun filter through them and enjoying the calm.

Suddenly he felt the air move around him. He was more aware this time and it felt - not as though he were the one moving, but as though he had remained still and the world had shifted

under him.

When he opened his eyes, they were in the church. Cy was still gripping his hand tightly. He didn't appear surprised in the least, which, if Will had been thinking more clearly, would have been surprising in itself. He finally let go of Will's wrist, taking a step back and looking him up and down. Will felt sick. He heaved, collapsing on the floor.

"Never traveled with anyone before, have ya?" Cy asked. He looked around, taking in their surroundings. "You think you'll find protection in this church, boy?"

Will looked up at him, unsure how to respond.

"God created the Devil," Cy said, voice full of gravel. "You really think the wicked can't set foot in a church?"

Will continued to stare. That hadn't been what he was thinking at all - he liked the church because it was calm, but he'd never been particularly religious.

"Neither of us could be here if that were true. Entry is always granted to the wicked. They want us to repent."

Cy crouched down in front of Will, grabbed his wrist once more and pulled. The air shifted around them and Will instinctively closed his eyes. When he opened them again they were standing in a hazy grey cloud, as though they were in the middle of a fog that had suddenly crept in from the harbor.

"You're not the only one who can travel," Cy said, his voice taking on a menacing quality.

"Where are we?" Will asked shakily. Wherever it was, they were alone.

"This is what's known as a liminal space."

"What does that mean?"

Cy laughed in response, but it was a hard sound. He still hadn't released Will's wrist. "It's a space outside of space, boy. We are nowhere."

"I don't want to be here," Will said. Cy laughed harshly again, eyes flashing. Will wiggled in his grip, but Cy tightened his hand.

"Stop," he said.

Will felt a tingle at the back of his skull. He'd felt it before, but more faintly. He tried to remember when and where, stilling momentarily as Cy watched him. The older man's lips curled into a cruel smile and Will realized suddenly where he'd felt it before. *Jack.*

It was magic. Cy was trying to command him to do something. And he thought he'd succeeded.

"That's a good boy," he said. "You do what your old friend Cy says."

“No,” Will yelled. Cy was still holding his wrist and Will pulled it back quickly, mimicking Cy’s motion from earlier. He had a brief moment to register the other man’s shocked expression before he realized he’d made a mistake. He’d brought them back to the church, but he’d done something wrong.

Will’s hands flew to his ears as he crouched, making himself small and closing his eyes instinctively. He barely registered the noise of the implosion as shards of stained glass flew across the room, falling in a kaleidoscope along the floor and pews.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter got kind of long and I ended up pushing out a few things I originally wanted to include - like what the deal is with Will's Aunt.

zanmi m means my friend in Creole (according to google translate, anyway:))

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will was up early the next morning, ready to go home. Thankfully Jack didn't see any point in waiting either, arriving promptly at 6am to sign all the forms indicating Will was being released into his custody. Will wondered if he should feel annoyed, but it was surprisingly calming to have Jack take control of the situation.

Still, the sign-out process seemed to stretch on interminably and he shifted from foot to foot in agitation until Jack finally turned and fixed him with a glare.

Will had the sudden, childish urge to fidget more. Instead he stilled, drumming his fingers against his leg. He took a calming breath. He hadn't noticed before that the air smelled of lavender. He inhaled the scent deeply, allowing it to calm him until Jack was done and walking his way, motioning for him to follow.

"What are you doing?" Jack hissed as they headed toward the double doors and back out into the world. Will looked up at the sky. Anticipation had stilted his sleep and he'd spent several hours imagining emerging to warm sun and blue skies.

It was dreary and overcast. He shivered. "What do you mean?"

"The lavender." Jack's voice was a low rumble.

Will shrugged. "Yeah, that was nice. The nurses must have a diffuser or something."

The older man stopped and turned, clearly frustrated. "Are you trying to be funny?"

"No." Will stood still, looking resolutely at Jack's chin and feeling ill at ease under the man's stare in a way he hadn't in years. He bit hard on the knuckle in his thumb before pulling his hand away from his mouth and peering at intently. He didn't recall raising his hand. He needed the sun. His mind was being clouded by the weather.

Well that's utter nonsense. He shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut. *Why was Jack asking about the lavender?* He thought back. He'd been anxious, he wanted to feel calmer, he didn't like the smell in the hospital corridor, he -

"Oh." He reopened his eyes, hoping against reason to see a kinder expression on Jack's face. He was met with the same stern look, though he detected genuine concern beneath it.

Jack stepped forward, voice soft. "You haven't asked why you were released to me."

Will fidgeted with his shirt sleeves, fighting the urge to step back. The statement was more accusation than question. "You've had control of me since I was fourteen."

The older man chuckled softly, causing Will to look at him in surprise. “I’ve been your *guardian* since you were fourteen, Will,” he corrected. “I doubt anyone’s ever had control of you.” He paused, his face resuming its previously stern expression. “The problem comes when you don’t have control of yourself.”

Will swallowed. His mouth was suddenly very dry.

“This was minor, Will,” Jack leaned closer, voice soft and low. Will nodded. Jack placed a heavy hand on Will’s shoulder. For a brief moment Will saw his father’s face in his guardian’s earnest expression. He felt a pang of regret followed immediately by guilt that it wasn’t his father he missed, but the image of his mother. They stood, connected, for what felt like several minutes before Will shrugged out of the touch, giving in to his urge to step backward and restore the distance between them.

Jack didn’t say anything more. Instead he moved toward his car, Will trailing behind.

“Are you taking me to my apartment or to your house?” Will asked as he stepped into the vehicle.

“Your apartment.” Jack buckled his seatbelt and waited for Will to do the same before starting the car. The pattern was familiar and Will couldn’t help the hint of a smile curling at his lips, remembering car rides from his teenage years. He turned it into a scowl.

“Wouldn’t your house be preferable?” he asked, caustically. “You could ‘keep an eye on me.’”

If Jack were a man to roll his eyes he would have. Instead he heaved a sigh and said nothing. Will sunk down into his seat, feeling ridiculous. He chanced a glance at Jack. There was an odd tension to the man, and Will remembered the pain in his eyes.

“If you want to talk,” Will started, but Jack gripped the steering wheel tightly, his lips forming a hard, thin line. Will turned to the window and said nothing more. He watched the trees passing along the side of the highway, chasing images in their branches. It was a game he’d played as a child on long road trips; manufacturing his own fairy tales out of disinterested surroundings.

“We have a new case,” Jack offered eventually. They hadn’t spoken for nearly half the trip, Will staring resolutely out the window and Jack maintaining a vice-like grip on the wheel of the car.

“Good to know my skills are still desired,” Will grumbled, wondering if he should be relieved that he hadn’t been suspended. “I assume you have the file?”

“I have a few,” Jack said. “One is ours, two are consults.”

Will turned from the window then, eyebrows raised. He hadn’t been asked for a consult in more than a year. “I thought you didn’t want to waste me on anything non-magical.”

Jack's grip tightened further on the steering wheel, leaving a deeper impression of his palms and fingertips in the leather. Will pictured him days later, matching his hands to the depressions he'd created, gripping, gripping, knuckles turning white. Will couldn't see the road Jack was on or his destination, but wherever he was headed was dark and the need to arrive was urgent.

"Are you with me Will?" Jack asked, concern clear in his voice. Will felt his body jolt as though a tether were snapping him back into place. He opened his eyes, not realizing he'd closed them, and felt immediately dizzy. He closed them again, swallowing thickly and fighting a wave of nausea.

"I'm here," Will said, breathing deeply as the sick feeling subsided. He could feel Jack's eyes on him: questing, questioning. "You should focus on the road, Jack."

Something about that made Jack laugh, a brief, halting noise that was more from anxiety than amusement. He fell silent once more and Will began to think he wouldn't get an answer on the consults. Not that the reason mattered - when Jack decided something would happen, it happened. Privately, Will enjoyed them. Chasing nonmagical criminals was an entirely different type of hunt.

"It's a case you consulted on before." Jack spoke with an exaggerated slowness, as though he were hesitant to explain. Or maybe reconsidering Will's involvement.

Will made a noncommittal sound of acknowledgement. He expected Jack to relax at that, satisfied Will was still willing to assist, but the man remained tense, sitting ramrod straight in his seat. Both men were silent for several moments; Will studying Jack while Jack studiously avoided acknowledging being studied.

As they turned into his apartment complex, something in Jack seemed to cave. "We need to discuss something else."

"Doctor Lecter," Will mused. "Have no fear, Jack. He invited me for dinner; I'll be seeing him tonight. Says he wants to get to know me." He fixed Jack with a cold stare. "I assume he'll be filling me in on the requirements."

"Twice weekly." A pause. Then: "It wasn't my call Will."

"No, of course not," Will scoffed. "Though I doubt you argued against it too strongly." For once, Jack seemed properly chagrinned. Will pinched the bridge of his nose. He was suddenly very tired.

"Call it peace of mind."

Will snorted. Whose peace of mind was it, exactly? Forced social interaction did nothing for his. He opted not to say anything more as Jack pulled into a vacant parking space in front of his building.

"Thanks for the ride," he said quietly as he exited the car. Jack nodded and Will took him in for a moment, his hand on the door. There were new lines of tension around his eyes that Will

was certain had nothing to do with him. “Give my best to Bella,” he added and Jack flinched before nodding quickly. Will bit his lip to keep from asking why, pushing away the frustrated feeling that if it had something to do with her he not only wanted but *deserved* to know. Bella had been like a mother to him. Much more than Jack had been like a father, if Will was being honest.

Bella might also be the only person who could, with a well placed word or a tender smile, render all of Jack’s stubborn posturing ineffective. Will had been in awe of it as a teenager. He rarely managed to put anyone at ease. Certainly not Jack.

But whatever it was, they wouldn’t be talking about it any time soon.

I’m here when you’re ready.

Jack nodded again, as though he’d heard Will’s thought. He grabbed the files from the backseat and passed Will four manila folders. “See you on Monday,” he said gruffly before driving away, leaving Will to head up the stairs to his neglected apartment.

Will briefly considered making coffee and taking care of things like buying groceries and cleaning, but decided against it. It wasn’t even 10am but he was exhausted. He set the folders on his kitchen table and, moving into his bedroom, stripped to his boxers, dropping his clothes on the floor and crawling into bed.

He was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

***

Will turned the card over in his hand. He’d arrived at 7:55pm, not wanting to be late.

On the other hand he didn’t want to be early. Hannibal gave the impression of a man who expected precision in all things. Will was sitting in his car in front of the house down the street, watching the clock. From the corner of his eye he saw movement in the window of the house.

It was less than a minute into his self-enforced waiting period. Clearly this wasn’t the type of neighborhood where visitors idled in their cars.

Putting his car back in drive he went the rest of the distance to Hannibal’s house. He was still three minutes early, but he could take his time getting out of the car and moving up the walk to the front door.

He stood in front of the door with one minute to spare and smoothed his hands down the flannel shirt he was wearing, self conscious at arriving empty-handed He’d changed outfits three times, staring at himself in the mirror and considering calling Beverly for advice, before chastising himself for treating this dinner like some sort of event where he needed to *impress* instead of what it actually was: a civilized setting in which Hannibal intended to pick his brain.

Irritated, he'd decided Hannibal could deal with him as he was and he changed back into old jeans and a flannel shirt. He doubted dinner would be all that pleasant; he might as well dress as he pleased.

At 8pm precisely he pressed the doorbell, then immediately wondered if he should have knocked instead. The dark blue door was adorned with a heavy, ornamental knocker.

Hannibal seemed like the type of person who would knock.

Will reached up to trace the metal with his fingertips, admiring the smoothness of it. It felt warm. There was something curious about it, but before he could follow that thought any further the door in front of him opened.

He was not surprised to see that Hannibal was wearing yet another suit; this one a light gray in color with a subtle stripped pattern. There was a beat where they took each other in and Will felt irritatingly self conscious about his clothing. But if Hannibal disapproved he didn't allow it to show. Instead he stood back from the door, a clear invitation for Will to enter, and intoned pleasantly, "Welcome, Will, you're right on time."

Right on time, Will's mind parroted. He resisted the urge to smirk.

"Should I take off my shoes?" Will asked, taking in the slippers lined along the wall underneath the coat rack.

"I would like you to be comfortable."

An answer that was not actually an answer. *And so it begins.* Will glanced quickly between Hannibal and the shoes, considering whether he had selected socks without holes in them and then toeing off his sneakers. He set his shoes next to the slippers, but did not put any of them on.

The corners of Hannibal's lips twitched in the briefest semblance of a smile. He motioned for Will to follow and Will padded behind him, taking in the home. The art lining the wall was chosen for its prestige as much as its fit with the decor. Will paused briefly in front of one of them, an image of a woman reclined on a couch, another woman feeding her grapes. He was certain if he ran his finger along the frame it would come away clean.

There were a few decorative items on side tables. Will saw two intricate glass bowls, a vase with flowers he didn't recognize, and what appeared to be a dagger with a bone handle. They were all carefully placed so as to appear casual and haphazard. Will bet there were pencil lines beneath them so they could be moved back to their precise locations after being dusted. He wondered if he could find an excuse to pick one up and see.

As they made their way into the kitchen the air shifted, suddenly effused with a pleasant warmth. Though it was no less clean the kitchen felt used in a way the entrance to the house did not. Hannibal clearly spent time in the room and Will felt himself relaxing. Even Hannibal was more casual in the space. Will watched as his host unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled up his shirt sleeves, exposing muscular forearms.

“I need only plate the food,” Hannibal said, “but I thought you might like to have a drink before dinner?”

“I suppose if you’re offering it’s alright to drink?”

Hannibal gave him a considering look. “You may abstain if you prefer.”

“I don’t prefer,” Will groused. He might as well get something out of this visit. (Or whatever it was.) Hannibal’s face didn’t change but Will had the distinct impression the man was amused.

Two wine glasses and a bottle of red sat on the counter. Will would have preferred something stronger, but anything would do. Hannibal lifted the bottle and poured with a slight flourish, similar to the way he’d put away Will’s chart in the hospital. Will ducked his head and smiled, composing his expression before accepting the offered wine glass.

Hannibal was watching him, clearly waiting for a response, so Will took a small sip. “It’s good,” he said, surprised to realize it was true. He’d never been a big fan of wine; he’d never thought he had the palate for it, having always been more of a beer and whiskey drinker.

He took another, longer drink. Maybe he’d been buying the wrong type of wine. He wondered if he could surreptitiously get a look at the label.

If it’s anywhere near my price range, he thought, glancing around the kitchen again. Everything in it was subtly expensive; the understated quality of old wealth. He considered Hannibal, wondering against his will about the man’s history. He thought of the brief flash he caught in Hannibal’s eyes before they had shuttered to him.

The foyer had been carefully impersonal but as Will considered Hannibal in front of him he had the distinct impression of a man alone. Separate. Contained unto himself. He felt the sudden but unshakeable void of absence, as though *something else* should have been there, and he stared at Hannibal, trying to determine what was lacking but unable to pinpoint it. His host seemed perfectly happy.

Will’s eyes trailed across the surfaces. There wasn’t anything obviously out of place in the room, and the only items on the counter were the items Hannibal was actively using. There were a few dishes in the sink, but even those somehow managed to look like they belonged there; as though Hannibal’s meticulous, rigidly ordered world had carved out even a place for his dirty dishes.

Still, that same pleasant atmosphere Will had sensed when he entered remained. He didn’t need magic to feel it or see it. This was the space where Hannibal felt most himself. He was happy there.

“You’ve invited me to your inner sanctum rather quickly, don’t you think?” Will probed, arching an eyebrow.

“Is that what I’m doing?” Hannibal appeared hesitant, though Will thought it was mainly for show. “If I’m being honest, I wasn’t entirely sure you’d come.”

“I didn’t think I had a choice.”

“You always have a choice, Will.” Hannibal’s voice was soft but his eyes were intent on Will’s own. Will stared back, caught.

“Tell that to Jack Crawford,” Will muttered, his eyes skittering away from Hannibal’s. He regretted the words almost immediately, cringing inwardly. In the end it didn’t matter who’s ‘call’ it had been for Will to be monitored. Jack would no doubt receive updates on Will’s supposed mental health and ability to perform.

He felt suddenly, intensely angry; all of the rage he hadn’t felt earlier catching up to him and threatening to choke him. He stared at his hand as his fingers tapped an agitated pattern on the marble countertop.

“From what I understand meeting with you twice weekly is a requirement for keeping my job.”

“If it’s a job you want to keep.” Hannibal agreed, far more amicable than he had any right to be.

Will ignored the question implicit in the statement. “Why this elaborate charade?” he asked. “Why dinner?”

“Is it a charade? Or am I simply opening my home to a friend for an evening of good food and conversation?”

“We’re not friends.”

“Not yet.” Hannibal’s eyes shown with amusement.

Will scowled and crossed his arms. “You were hired to report on my state of mind. I’m not a fool. You’re essentially my-” he paused, searching for the word and grinding it out - “handler.”

Hannibal watched him for a long moment and Will felt heat rising, unwanted and unbidden, to his face. He held his ground, locking his jaw.

“Does that bother you?”

Will snorted. *Of all the ridiculous…* He shook his head before answering, tersely: “Of course it bothers me, Doctor Lecter."

“Hannibal,” the other man chided gently. Will had the impression Hannibal was considering his words carefully. He looked away, uncomfortable with the quality of the silence between them and unsure why it mattered.

A moment later Will felt Hannibal’s eyes on him again. Turning to look was a compulsion Will fought against briefly, but in the end curiosity and the sheer novelty of meeting another’s gaze head on won out. It was only once their eyes met that Hannibal continued.

“You should know that I intend to tell Jack that you are competent, capable, and in full control of your mental faculties.”

Will’s frown deepened, disbelief clouding his thoughts. Hannibal was going to rubber stamp him? The man barely knew him. In all likelihood Will should be pleased. But -

“If you intend to clear me so quickly, why the twice weekly meetings? I take it that’s still a requirement.”

If Hannibal was at all bothered by Will’s surly attitude he didn’t show it. Will stared in defiance, wondering if he looked long enough if he would see something more in those eyes. Maybe another fleeting glance of snow?

But there was nothing; only reddish-brown eyes that held a surprising warmth as they looked him over. Anything more was shrouded in darkness.

“You reacted in an extraordinary way to an extraordinary event, Will. An entirely reasonable response.” Once more Hannibal paused. “Extraordinary things evoke both awe and fear.”

Will sat up straighter, fighting the urge to slouch. It was essentially what he’d expected to hear and effectively a compliment, and yet, somehow, the words stung.

Awe and fear. He wanted to ask which Hannibal felt. If he was to meet with this man, against his wishes - against his will, if he was being fully honest - it would be nice to know exactly where he stood.

Instead he sipped his wine and said nothing.

Without further comment, the doctor went back to plating their food. His pleasure hadn’t faded in the face of Will’s anger or subsequent silence. If anything it seemed to have grown; the barest hint of a smile evident on Hannibal’s face.

At least one of them was enjoying themselves.

Hannibal sprinkled some grated parmesan cheese on the dish and garnished each plate with a sprig of fresh basil. “*Spaghetti bolognese,*” he said, pronouncing the name of the dish with an Italian inflection.

“*Grazie,*” Will responded without thinking.

“*Parli italiano, Will?*”

“*Un po.* It’s been some time.”

“I learned Italian as a young man, but do not have many opportunities to use it in Baltimore.” There was a beat of silence where Will should have shared his own story but did not. Hannibal filled it smoothly. “It’s a pleasure to know someone else who speaks it.”

“I don’t remember much,” Will demurred.

“You’ll find it returns to you in time.” Hannibal opened the refrigerator to remove a salad bowl and two smaller plates. “The dining room is just through there,” he gestured with his head toward a door on the other side of the kitchen. “Please make yourself comfortable and I’ll join you shortly.”

Will hesitated but then nodded, lifting his plate and wineglass and heading through the door Hannibal had indicated. Regardless of the reason he was there he had to concede the food smelled amazing. At least he would get dinner out of the evening. He realized, with sudden clarity, that he was starving.

The dining room was dark; the walls painted a deep blue. Herbs lined one wall, while along the other was a buffet. Over the buffet was a rather erotic picture of Leda and the Swan. Will considered it for a long moment.

Odd choice for a dining room. The room was large; the table long and clearly intended for entertaining. Tonight the silver candelabra in the middle of the table remained unlit and only two place settings had been prepared, one at either side of the head of the table.

Will considered, then took the seat directly in front of the buffet, his back to the door, eyeing the centerpiece as he did.

It was made of a variety of elements: pine cones, something that looked a bit like wooden honeycomb that Will didn’t recognize, oranges with cloves pressed into the skin and pomegranates. Nestled between a pinecone and a pomegranate was a tiny, delicate looking skull.

“I found it as I was walking,” Hannibal said, setting the salad bowl, tongs, and plates on the table. The salad was swiftly followed by his own plate of spaghetti, wine glass, and the open bottle of wine, prompting Will to regret his decision to sit with his back to the door so he could have witnessed how Hannibal managed to transport that many items at once. He hadn’t magicked them there. At least Will was fairly certain he hadn’t; he would, he thought - hoped - have felt Hannibal’s magic if the other man had used it.

He was tempted to ask how he’d done it. Instead, he wondered aloud: “Do you know what kind of a bird it was?”

“I’m afraid birds are not my specialty. I’m much more familiar with human.” Hannibal’s eyes shown with amusement and Will couldn’t quite stop the corner of his mouth from quirking.

“May I?” he asked, extending his hand toward the skull. Hannibal nodded and Will touched the surface lightly. It had not been dead as long as it appeared; Hannibal had cleaned it after finding it. Still, it had been dead long enough that it was difficult to get a sense of what it might have been in life. Will closed his eyes and focused. He thought he heard Hannibal inhale sharply, but ignored it.

The bird was medium sized, brown with streaks of darker brown coloring. Spots on its wings that had an almost reddish tint. A dark spot in the center of a white breast.

“A song sparrow.” Will’s voice sounded distant to his own ear. Ss he opened his eyes he looked to Hannibal and was unsurprised to see the other man regarding him intently. “I - uh - used to have a book on birds.”

“Astonishing.”

Will felt himself flush, irritated with the way he warmed at the praise.

“Can you do that with any part of an animal?” Hannibal refilled Will’s wine glass as he asked the question. The tone was controlled - neutral, as though he were simply making conversation - but Will caught an intense and surprising curiosity beneath it. Once Will’s glass was satisfactorily filled Hannibal topped his own and took his seat across from Will.

“If I could, I probably wouldn’t eat meat.” Self-consciously Will lifted his fork, twirling pasta around it for longer than he needed to before raising it to his lips. Feeling Hannibal’s eyes on him again he glanced up. The doctor was still watching him intently, although not, Will thought, for the same reason.

“It’s delicious,” he said, unconsciously echoing his comment about the wine.

Hannibal smiled, showing the edge of his teeth this time. The canines were as sharp as Will remembered. *Capable of drawing blood*. He wondered if Hannibal had ever bitten anyone.

He resisted the urge to shake his head, wondering at his own thoughts. He shifted his focus more fully to Hannibal’s voice, thankfully catching that Hannibal had made the pasta himself that morning.

“Did you butcher the cow yourself, too?”

If Hannibal was irritated by the question he didn’t show it. “Not this time, no, although I do prefer to be involved in the process.”

Of course you do. Will longed to roll his eyes but instead took another bite, marveling at the flavors. There was something subtly different about it.

“I did ensure the beef was grass-fed,” Hannibal added, answering Will’s unspoken question.

Will sipped his wine, surprised at how well the flavor of it mixed with the meal. “I thought this was a simple dish, but there’s really nothing simple about it, is there?”

Hannibal grinned widely this time, once more showing his fangs. “I believe I told you cooking is a passion of mine. It’s important to spend time cultivating the things we love.”

“*La gatta frettolosa fece i gattini ciechi*.” Will muttered the, until that moment, forgotten phrase under his breath, but not so low that Hannibal did not hear.

The other man raised his glass. “To time well spent.”

Will raised his glass in turn. *We’ll see about that.*

***

Everything was dark. Dark, and very, very quiet.

Will was still getting used to the dorms; the thickness of the walls blocking out any sound between the students' rooms.

All Will's life - to that point, anyway, because Will was wise enough, even at thirteen, nearly fourteen, to realize he hadn't lived much yet at all - he'd lived with sound. The sounds had varied from the car alarms and midnight shouts from the sidewalk of the cities to the softer sounds of cars and distant music of the suburbs to the music of crickets and cicadas or the cry of coyotes when they lived further away from civilization.

The utter absence of sounds in the dorms was disconcerting, to say the least. He wondered if it was part of a greater experiment, like the whole supposed school. Nothing more than another test to see how the students reacted. Will's eyes drifted to the blackout curtain of the window.

He shifted on the bed. He still half expected a squeal of springs each time he did, but the bed was also quiet. Pressing his hands down into the mattress, he tried to sense the spell of silence. Tried to find the threads of it and unwind it.

Cy always said Will was better at destruction than creation.

Will bit his lip. He didn't want to think about Cy. Instead, he pressed his hands more firmly into the mattress, feeling.

The sensation of magic was unmistakeable but difficult to explain. A bit between a buzzing and a tingling sensation, almost like a low current of electricity. It reminded Will of the way the boys at one of his schools would press batteries to their tongues to feel the jolt of electricity, laughing whenever someone new tried it and made a startled noise or jumped.

Will had never been asked to participate; he'd only watched from afar as his classmates tried to impress each other. But he'd gone home and pressed a 9 volt battery to his tongue, getting a quick jolt and nasty metallic taste in his mouth for his trouble.

The feeling the battery gave him was quickly over, but the feeling magic gave him lingered. It was as though pieces of him were moving around beneath his skin, trying to escape. It was so strong sometimes that Will wondered how he was still held together. At times he'd been frightened that he would come apart. Although he'd never felt that way when he was *using* magic.

There was no magic in the mattress, though. It was just a mattress. A nice one, on a bed that was well made and didn't squeak.

He wondered if it would squeak if he jumped on it.

Pulling his legs to his chest he shifted forward to stand on the bed, feeling rebellious. He'd never once jumped on his bed. He grinned to himself before biting his lip, crouching, and

launching himself toward the ceiling. He giggled as the bed beneath him groaned when he landed. *Just a bed, then.*

Still, there was something there. It was subtle - not tied to the bed specifically, but filling the air. It felt like a gentle caress and he remembered his mother kissing him tenderly on the forehead and a soft whisper. Except there was no way it had been his mother. Had it been his aunt?

But he didn't want to think about her, either. She'd disappeared a long time ago; as far as Will knew she'd never tried to find him. He might never know. He felt a sharp pain in his chest, the kind he thought he was long past. He clenched his eyes shut and bit the inside of his cheek, keeping his eyes shut tight for a long moment before opening them again, determined not to think about any of it anymore.

He grabbed his book from the nightstand. Despite the hour he could tell he wasn't going to fall asleep anytime soon and he'd discovered quickly that the windowsill was wide enough for him to sit in comfortably. He pulled back the blackout curtain and tucked himself into the space.

It was still winter and would be for several more weeks and, despite the thickness of the glass, the window was cold as Will leaned his cheek against it. He stared through the pane of glass for a few minutes. Either due to its thickness, construction or magic, although Will didn't try to sense it this time, the window warped the few lights still flickering in the houses in the distance so that they were blurred streaks instead of sharp points. The school was not entirely isolated but the few lights he saw seemed far away and impossible to reach. He pulled his cheek from the window, propped the book against his knees, and began to read.

The best thing about the school was that it had a library where he could borrow as many books as he wanted; no matter his classmates teasing that he preferred reading to socializing. The observation wasn't exactly misplaced, as *Dracula* was proving to be far more interesting than any of his classmates.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been reading when his eyes began to feel heavy. He rested his head against the cool of the window again and closed his eyes. He only meant to rest them for a moment but he woke, still curled in the windowsill, to a knocking on his door.

"Rise and shine, Will!" a voice called. Will groaned, shifting and feeling the blood rush back into his limbs. The knock came again. "Come on Willy boy. What, did you stay up half the night reading again?"

Will opened the door, scowling at the boy on the other side. Matt grinned.

"Matthew," Will said. It wasn't a greeting.

"Well good morning to you too, *William*." Matt's grin grew impish. He ruffled Will's curls. Will ducked.

"Stop it," he said to the floor, feeling his face flush. He wasn't sure if he liked or disliked Matt touching him. It felt overwhelming, but not entirely negative. It was more like he didn't

know what to do with the sensation. He wasn't sure what Matt meant by it. He wasn't sure how he felt or how he was supposed to feel, or how Matt wanted him to feel, and more than anything else the inability to figure out his own thoughts on the matter was frustrating.

Like the other kids at the school Matthew was older than Will. He was attractive, confident, decently skilled in magic and he could drive. And, if you believed the rumors (and Matt's own bragging), he'd had *sex*. It leant him an air of experience that made him seem even older than his sixteen years.

Will wasn't sure how to feel about that either. Everyone seemed so excited that Matt had done this mysterious thing they all talked and wondered about. But for Will the very thought of doing … *that* … made him squirm. Even so, there was something about Matt's attention that he liked, that made him feel special and warm and uncomfortable all at once. Maybe it was just that no one else made much of an effort to talk to him.

"Come on, Will," Matt said brightly, "get dressed. Breakfast is served."

The school's cafeteria was nice. It wasn't the library, but it served good food. Since Will had arrived Jack commented more than once that it must be nice for Will to get "three meals a day."

He'd always had three meals a day with his father. With Cy -

But Cy wasn't his father. Cy was an asshole. Thinking the word pleased Will. Even if he didn't say it out loud he could feel the texture of it on his tongue; the way it would feel to spit it at Cy's feet.

"You alright there, Will?" Matt elbowed him in the shoulder and Will started, nearly spilling the coffee he'd been pouring. Will nodded. "You're always stuck up in your own head. Spend some time with the rest of us."

Will wasn't sure how to respond, so he just shrugged and sipped the coffee to see if he'd added enough milk.

"Why do you drink that stuff anyway?" Matt asked, gesturing to the coffee cup.

"I like it," Will said quietly. It reminded him of mornings with his father, but for some reason he didn't want to share that with Matt.

"Do you now." The older boy's eyes were mischievous, although Will didn't look for too long. He was careful not to look long enough to See anything. "Mind if I try?"

Before Will could answer Matt had taken his mug and sipped from it, making a face when he did.

"Gross," he said. Will laughed and that seemed to make Matt happy. "You don't laugh much, do you Will?"

Will looked at the older boy in surprise. "I laugh as much as anyone else," he said defensively.

“Sure.” Matt shrugged. “It’s nice to hear it is all I’m saying. Let’s eat.”

He lifted his tray and headed toward a table full of their fellow students. Will followed but as usual veered off to sit at a smaller, unoccupied table. Matt gave him a slightly exasperated look but said nothing, seating himself and chatting with with blonde haired girl next to him. She looked back at Will briefly, but unlike Matt she did not smile at him. *Autumn,* Will thought, trying to place her. They’d been introduced but hadn’t spoken since.

Will ate his bacon and eggs quietly. Matt would tell him later that he should have sat with the rest of them - he always did, although Will was never sure if he meant it or if he was just being polite - but Will had never liked large groups of people and he felt the vast difference in his age compared to everyone else’s even more acutely when sitting with the group.

The gap in his schooling hadn’t been much to overcome. Until Mobile he’d been ahead anyway. Jack had given him tutors when he first arrived, but Will didn’t need them for long. He was at roughly the same academic level as the younger members of the school. He was ahead of them magically but not, his teachers like to remind him, for the right reasons.

“You’re too instinctive,” they told him. “You’re doing things but you don’t know why or how. You need to think or you *will* lose control.” Will wanted to argue, but then he’d never meant to set his school on fire - not really - so maybe they had a point. It was not lost on Will that his teachers were extra cautious around him.

He picked at his fruit cup. When Jack had first brought him to the school he thought it would be different. That maybe, since all the kids there were, by standard definition, *weird*, he’d fit in. But it wasn’t. Even among the weird kids Will was weird. He stabbed a piece of fruit, lifting it from the cup before pushing it off his fork to join the other pieces. He didn’t want to be there. He missed his father. It wasn’t that things with his father had been better, or even very different. But the elder Graham did love him, in his way. He hadn’t wanted Will to come to any harm.

But then, his father had wanted him *here*. That was the reason they’d moved, and it was the reason Jack had eventually come to Mobile.

Feeling eyes on him, he looked up to see Matt smiling at him. He smiled back even though he didn’t feel like it.

Will went back to picking at his fruit cup. He plucked the seeds out of a piece of watermelon angrily, uncertain why he suddenly felt so upset, before popping it in his mouth and chewing it with more force than was necessary. It wasn’t quite the season for watermelon and the flavor was too light, almost watery. Instead of eating any more of it Will picked out the blueberries (slightly too tart) and the cantaloupe (not much better than the watermelon). The honeydew slices were delicious, though. Idly, Will plucked out the remaining pieces of watermelon, arranging them in a circle on his tray. He watched as the slices grew into a tiny melon, smiling as the vine traveled off the table and onto the floor, journeying its way across the cafeteria.

He felt eyes on him and looked up to see the blonde girl - *Autumn* - staring at him with wide eyes.

“Will,” a voice boomed across the room. An unfortunately familiar voice. The watermelon shriveled as Will watched it, rotting before his eyes. He looked up into Jack’s dark eyes and then quickly away. Jack looked Will up and down with a sigh. He wasn’t supposed to do magic in the cafeteria. Had another teacher caught him, he would have had detention. But he doubted that was why Jack was there.

“Come with me, Will.” Jack’s voice boomed across the cafeteria.

“Why?”

Someone from the other side of the room stifled an uncomfortable laugh. Jack had only been to the school a few times. He’d recruited most of the students, so they all knew him, but he left the teaching to the staff. Still, Will knew he had his eye on things. Jack might have been kinder to him than the other agents, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t a shrewd man. A man not to be trifled with. A man no one second guessed, much less someone who was barely a teenager.

No one, when asked by Jack Crawford to do something, asked why.

Jack didn’t answer. Will took in his posture: tense, guarded. Whatever this was, it was bad news.

“Just come with me, Will.” Jack’s voice was softer and had taken on an almost pleading tone. Will stared at the remnants of his watermelon, still shriveling away into nothing. He felt numb, watching it, wondering if he were shriveling away. From across the cafeteria he felt Matthew’s eyes on him, a prickling sensation like an itch beneath his skin.

He looked back at Jack, meeting his eyes briefly. He considered meeting them long enough to See, but he he didn’t want to - he didn’t want to know what Jack had to say. Or what Jack wanted him to *see*.

***

Will sat on the couch of his apartment, photographs spread out on the coffee table in front of him.

He hadn’t intended to look at the files that evening. He hadn’t, in all honesty, intended to look at them before he was required back to work on Monday. He’d returned from Hannibal’s to see them sitting innocuously on his kitchen table and had scoffed at them, annoyed at Jack for giving him what amounted to homework when he was still supposedly recovering and required to attend -

Well, he still wasn’t entirely sure what dinner that night had been. The conversation had been pleasant, the food had been, frankly, incredible, and the brandy-laced coffee Hannibal had offered as an after dinner drink had burned pleasantly down Will’s throat and warmed his stomach, the combination of it all relaxing him so that he actually felt content to be there.

All of which he was certain had been the point. In retrospect he was annoyed he’d been taken in by it. Although maybe not as annoyed as he should be.

It was also much later than he would have expected for dinner with a ‘colleague’. Far too late to start looking at case files. Plus, there was no sense in ruining what had been, against all odds, a nice evening by looking at crime scene photos.

And Will was tired.

Actually, that wasn’t true.

He *should* have been tired, but despite his earlier exhaustion and Hannibal’s food and drink, he felt alert. Wired. He wasn’t sure if it was the caffeine from the coffee or the fact that he’d slept for so long earlier, but he knew he wasn’t going to fall asleep immediately anyway.

A discarded coffee cup sat on the table next to the files, giving the mocking impression they’d been waiting for him to come back. Waiting for him to *look*. (Waiting for him to *see*.)

Will pulled his eyes away to put the leftovers he’d been given in his fridge. He stared at the glass containers of spaghetti and tiramisu sitting alone on the shelf and sighed. He’d tried to politely decline the parting offer, but Hannibal had insisted with equal politeness and in the end Will thought not accepting would have been rude.

Staring at his virtually empty fridge he was grateful he had.

He considered the containers, leaning into the cool of the refrigerator for a long moment before he grabbed the container of tiramisu and a fork, brewed some stale coffee (nowhere near as good as Hannibal’s even when it had been fresh) and succumbed to the siren song of the files, grabbing them from the kitchen table and moving to the couch.

The top file was the crime he’d been investigating when *it* happened. Will flipped quickly through the photos. There were fewer of them than usual - likely due to the photographer’s inability to withstand the magical energy. Will didn’t spend a lot of time on the file. He’d have to give Jack his notes eventually, but at the moment he was only curious about one thing.

The wall where the mirror had been was unsurprisingly blank and, also unsurprisingly, showed no signs of anything unusual.

Will sighed. It was unlikely anything would have shown up in the photographs anyway.

He moved on to the next file. It was one of the nonmagical crimes, and Will laid out the photographs between bites of tiramisu, careful to avoid getting any crumbs on the pictures or the accompanying notes.

The victims in question had been dismembered, limbs cut at the joints. Feet had been replaced by hands, hands by feet. The head was left in the genital area and the genitals themselves were gone, though in one case they’d been found tossed haphazardly in an alley about 50 feet from the primary scene.

Will frowned at that, taking another bite. It either meant the other victims had received the same treatment, or the unsub had been forced to get rid of their trophy in that incidence. Will

licked his lips, tapping on the photograph of a man's discarded penis.

It was a trite crime, frankly. A commentary from someone who believed they had a grand design when in fact they had very little to say. It was, in a word, boring. He wondered why it needed a consult to begin with and why on earth Jack had agreed to have Will consult on *this* crime.

He was almost out of dessert and, despite eating his fill at Hannibal's, he felt strangely hungry. It was probably the alcohol. He'd been careful not to drink so much that he couldn't drive home safely, alternating with water throughout the night, but it had been a long time since Will had indulged in any alcohol; even before the hospital stay. A stay Hannibal had reminded him he was still recovering from.

He considered and then decided against eating the spaghetti bolognese in the fridge. He still hadn't been to the store. He grimaced as he took a sip of subpar coffee, thinking he would absolutely need something better when he went and wondering briefly what kind of coffee Hannibal had served him. At least with the leftovers in the fridge he'd have something for breakfast.

He smirked, remembering again Hannibal's insistence that he take the extra. Hannibal played it off as politeness, wanting to be able to serve a guest his fill. Undoubtedly a lie. Hannibal planned everything carefully. The amount of food on their dishes had been precise, the level of wine in their glasses precise (even when Hannibal topped them off) and the size of the dessert set before him equally precise.

No; Hannibal knew exactly how much he was serving each guest. Will strongly suspected he made extra in order to send guests home with something that would remind them of him later, allowing him to worm himself into their minds and lives.

Will scowled down at the remaining tiramisu. There was no more than two bites left.

He put the entirety of it on his fork and shoved it into his mouth. A part of him expected it to have somehow soured, or at least lost *something* in the face of Will's thoughts.

It hadn't. It was still incredible. Damn Hannibal.

Will set the container and utensil to the side, focusing once again on the photographs in front of him. Reconstructing a crime was far more difficult from his couch with only pictures to refer to. There was something about the atmosphere of a crime scene - something that could be said more of the magical scenes, certainly, but even nonmagical criminals left behind an … *essence* for lack of a better word.

He shifted the photographs around, glancing at the now-empty container of tiramisu before considering the leftover spaghetti in the fridge again and again deciding against eating it. Instead he stood and arched his back, feeling the pleasant stretch along his spine.

The side table next to his couch was one of the nicer pieces of furniture he owned. He'd found it at a garage sale shortly after signing the lease on the apartment. It had originally been part of a set, according to the seller, but the other pieces had been damaged or lost,

setting the small table adrift in the world. He was aware it was odd to feel kinship with a piece of furniture, but Will had been instantly drawn to the piece and had paid the seller's price of fifty dollars without arguing over it - even though it seemed like far too much money for a simple side table. In fact, it had ended up costing more than the first kitchen table Will had purchased.

He smiled at the thought. He'd eventually upgraded the kitchen table to one that didn't wobble, but most of his furniture was still mismatched - and still less expensive than the silly side table.

But it was a sturdy table with a small compartment for storage. Inside Will kept a few dog eared books and a bottle of whiskey. It was this bottle he pulled out, pouring a generous amount into his coffee and taking a long sip. The burn of the whiskey behind the lukewarm coffee was pleasant, although he found himself comparing it unfavorably to Hannibal's after dinner coffees for the the second time that evening.

It was ridiculous. He'd had one dinner with the man. One. A dinner he was all but forced to attend.

He took a larger sip of the coffee and whiskey, coughing when he tried to swallow. Gathering the photos on his coffee table together he shoved them back into their file before setting it to the side. The profile suggested the killer had some sort of medical training, but Will doubted it. They was comfortable with a knife and knew how and where to cut, but there was no finesse to the removal of the extremities and the stitching that reattached them was effective but unskilled. If they were in or training to be in the medical profession, it wasn't anyone Will wanted to see. He laughed into his coffee.

His hand moved to the second file, flipping it open. The images were disturbing - or they would have been if they hadn't been so familiar. Another cluster of students stabbed and posed provocatively. He sighed. Although he hadn't admitted it even in the privacy of his own mind, when Jack said he'd consulted on the case previously he'd been hoping for something else - someone else. Someone more … inspiring. A brief glance suggested more rage associated with the more recent kills, which only suggested the killer was escalating and becoming more confident. Arrogant, even, considering the busy location where the third victim had last been seen.

When it came to catching him that was a good thing - arrogance lead to errors - but it would likely come at the expense of more lost lives. That the most recent victim had been male instead of female was interesting, though. Every prior victim had been female, so what was special about this last one?

Will drew a hand down his face. The alcohol was clearly overwhelming the caffeine, because he felt suddenly exhausted. He took a final sip of his coffee, surprised it how much it had cooled, and cringed at the taste. He flipped the file closed. It could wait until morning. He needed sleep - more sleep, it was as if he was catching up for the sleep he'd lacked over the last decade of his life - and some decent coffee.

He briefly wondered if he should ask Hannibal what brand of coffee he brewed, but dismissed the thought as quickly as it came.

Or maybe he *should* ask, he mused, tapping his finger on the fourth and final file. Hannibal wanted to be “friendly.” He wanted to draw Will to him.

Two could play at that game.

The best way to manipulate a psychiatrist, or anyone really, was to give them exactly what they wanted. Will grinned to himself. *Be careful what you wish for, Doctor Lector.*

Will’s fingers drifted across the paper beneath them. For a moment he felt the molecules within, the makeup of the folder like a puzzle, pieces interlocking at a level far too small for most people to comprehend. A moment later the sensation faded.

He wasn’t entirely certain why he flipped it open, but as soon as he did he drew in a breath and checked the file’s categorization again.

Had something been mixed up?

The scene in front of him was unmistakeable. The display was always unpredictable, but all the hallmarks were there; left in a public area to be found quickly and yet somehow elaborately staged, organs missing but removed with surgical precision, the body fastidiously cleaned so that the only “evidence” left behind was a utter lack of forensic material.

And yet, this crime had been classified as magical.

A small amount of magical residue at the scene.

It could have been a mistake. A reaction from a witness. An errant use of magic from one of the officers. It couldn’t be entirely discounted considering the number of people milling about the scene. But Will still found himself dialing Jack at - he looked at his watch - nearly 2 in the morning.

Will snorted when the call went to voicemail. *It’s good to be king.*

He left a one sentence message: “He has magic, Jack."

***

Will wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting when he followed Jack out of the cafeteria and into his office. A few times Jack had asked Will to look at pictures and tell Jack what he saw. They were crime scene photos. Jack had tried to hide that the first time, but Will wasn’t stupid, it was hard to hide, and it wasn’t like Will didn’t know what Jack did outside the school. Apparently Will had made a comment during one of his classes that Jack thought was “insightful”. Will still wasn’t sure what he’d said, and he hadn’t particularly liked looking at the pictures.

He’d thought after the first time Jack wouldn’t ask again - but he’d ask a second time, and then a third. And Will didn’t need to See anything in Jack’s eyes to see he was excited, even if Will wasn’t entirely sure why.

As they approached Jack’s office Will hoped it wasn’t another crime scene.

But he hoped even harder it didn't have anything to do with Cy. Will had a squirming feeling in his stomach. Jack had convinced Cy to give Will up, to let him come to the school, but what if Cy had decided to take Will back? *Could he?* Will wondered.

He'd been so relieved when Jack showed up at their door, asking after Will's father, and then leaving with Will in tow.

Will still wasn't entirely certain what Jack had said or done, but no matter how many dead bodies he had to look at he knew he would always be grateful. But that didn't necessarily mean he was *happy.*

"What now Jack?" Will asked as the silence stretched between them. Jack gave him an exasperated look.

"You know, most of the students here call me 'Mr. Crawford.'" He paused. "In fact, so do most of the faculty.

Will shrugged. "You told me to call you Jack."

Jack said nothing, but Will didn't need to See to see the question on Jack's face.

"When we first met," Will explained. "You told me your name was Jack."

For a moment Jack looked surprised, but then his face softened and he smiled. "I did." He seemed amused by it, which Will didn't understand, but when Will thought about it he didn't particularly care. His stomach clenched. He tapped his fingers against his thigh, felt Jack looking at his hand, and willed himself to still. But there was an itch beneath his skin. He needed to move, or scream or cry - something to release the tightness inside of him.

A moment later his fingers were moving again without his permission. The silence stretched. Will starred at the floor, refusing to look up at Jack, and he bared his teeth at the carpet of Jack's office. Beige. Good for hiding coffee stains, but Will still thought he spotted one. If he looked harder he would know when it had happened, but he didn't want to look. He was anticipating Jack's words, but not the gentle tone.

"Will, I need you to look at a picture."

Will shoved his hands in his pockets, pinching the fabric inside. "Ok," he said, quietly. He looked up, focusing on Jack's chin. Jack shook his head.

"They're not -," Jack paused. He was nervous, Will realized. For once, Jack was as afraid as he was. "It's your father Will. They think they found him, but we need you to look at some photographs to identify him."

Will went still. There was a pressure traveling through him, pressing its way out through his skin. He wondered if Jack could see it. Was there a mist around him? Maybe he would turn to gas and seep into the floor.

Suddenly Jack's hand was on his shoulder, warm and heavy. "Deep breathes, Will," Jack said. Will tried, concentrating on the weight of Jack's hand. Jack was taller than normal, and when

Will looked down he saw his feet sunk into the carpet, disappearing into the brown fibers.

In a moment he would be nothing more than another stain on Jack Crawford's carpet. He laughed. It wasn't a normal laugh, but a high, wild sound.

"Will?" Jack's hands were on his arms, gripping him tightly. Then, someone else's hands were on his shoulders. Smaller than Jack's, less heavy, but familiar. "It's not - he's not -"

"Calm down, Willy boy."

Will sank down, curling into a ball, feeling himself sinking. He didn't want Matt to see him like this. He didn't want anyone to see him like this. He would tell all their classmates, they would think Will was even more of a weirdo.

"They won't," Matt said softly. "I wouldn't do that to you, Will." Will flicked his eyes up to meet Matt's. It was only a brief look. There was compassion there; it matched the earnestness of Matt's voice. Will didn't want to see more, but he caught it anyway. Matt was kissing him.

Will flushed. It didn't surprise him Matt wanted that. Did Will? Should he feel pleased? He felt hot, and kind of dizzy, and neither thing of those things felt good.

"Why are you here?" Will asked.

"I wanted to make sure you were ok, and when I felt the magic," Matt shrugged. He ruffled Will's hair. It felt different, now, knowing why Matt wanted to touch him. Will felt a different sort of pressure under his skin. At some point he'd wrapped his arms around his legs, and he clenched tighter, trying to keep all the feelings in.

"You're very powerful, Will," Matt murmured. Will made an involuntary noise. He felt his eyes prickle with tears. He was out of control. It was what everyone thought. "Not me." Matt's voice was still soft. "I think you're pretty incredible."

A thumb swept the moisture from Will's cheekbone. Will couldn't remember the last time he'd cried, and he didn't want to be crying now, but suddenly he was: great, heaving and completely embarrassing sobs as Matt wrapped his arms around Will and pulled him close.

For once the feeling wasn't confusing. And even though Will knew he would be even more embarrassed later, he curled into Matt's body and let himself be held.

Chapter End Notes

This third chapter had been sitting partially written since I last updated. Which is pretty depressing since that was 2021.

The ethical implications of showing a 13 year old crime scene photos! Come on Jack. But he'll do anything to solve a case and while I would argue he cares about Will, Will is

also a tool in his arsenal that he is not above using, no matter what.

La gatta frettolosa fece i gattini ciechi. literally translates to "the hasty cat makes blind kittens". I don't know how commonly this phrase is actually used by Italians, but I did learn it in Italian class, so it's a real phrase. Basically it's saying you should take the time to do something correctly. My Italian professor was very big on taking time to properly prepare a meal, and ironically this phrase reminds me of both him and seems to fit Hannibal really well. Although I do think it's kind of a silly statement, since if you know anything about kittens, they are, in fact, born blind. (Their eyes remain closed and continue to develop outside the womb).

Anyway ...

This chapter starts to explore Will's sexuality in a somewhat vague way. My notes have more of that in them, though it's not really the focus of the story. But assuming I write more and assuming that does in fact end up in there, I guess I did want to put out there that I'm not necessarily trying to portray Will any particular way, because from what I've written so far you could assume he's somewhat ace or even sex averse and - yes, maybe as a kid, but that's not my head cannon for him as an adult and I don't want anyone reading this and then getting annoyed with me later. If anything his sexuality as I'm writing this is closest to my own, which I choose not to define. I wouldn't call it a personal exploration (though it might be as close as I get). But I did spend a lot of my younger years going "ew, gross."

End Notes

So . . . this started with the image of Will falling into a mirror and morphed into 12k words, and Hannibal doesn't even show up until the end.

I do fully intend to write more, so I put this up as Chapter 1 of who knows? but I am not going to make any promises regarding when I will get to/post more. Particularly since I have another WIP on here that I am definitely still updating and spent some time trying to replot yesterday (since I am way off my original plot line) and I have many, many other things I am working on or need to do in my personal/work life.

I have no particular reason for attacking Cymbeline at the beginning of this fic, although I will admit it's not one of my favorite Shakespeare plays. But the quote Will thinks of comes from it so it just kind of happened.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!